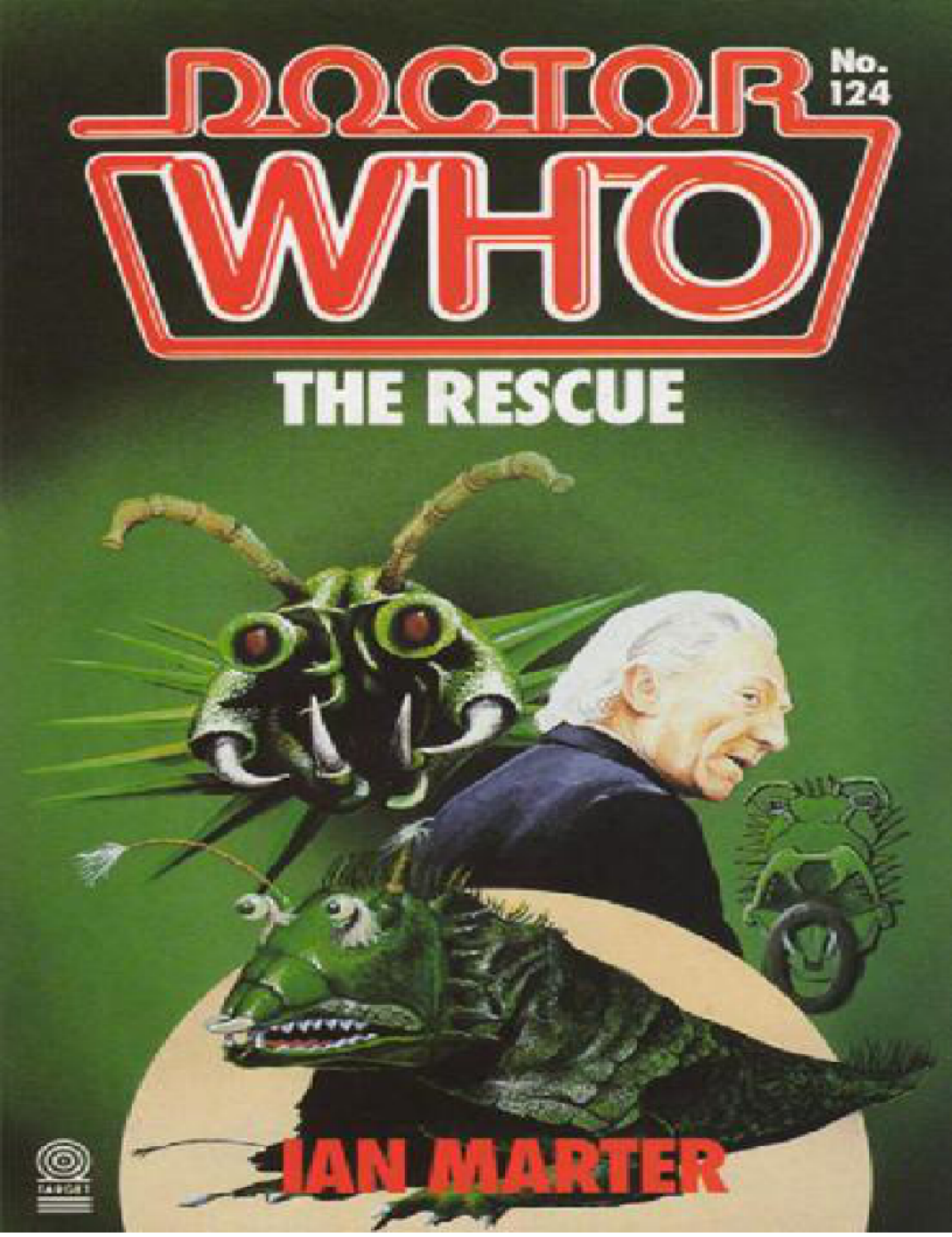
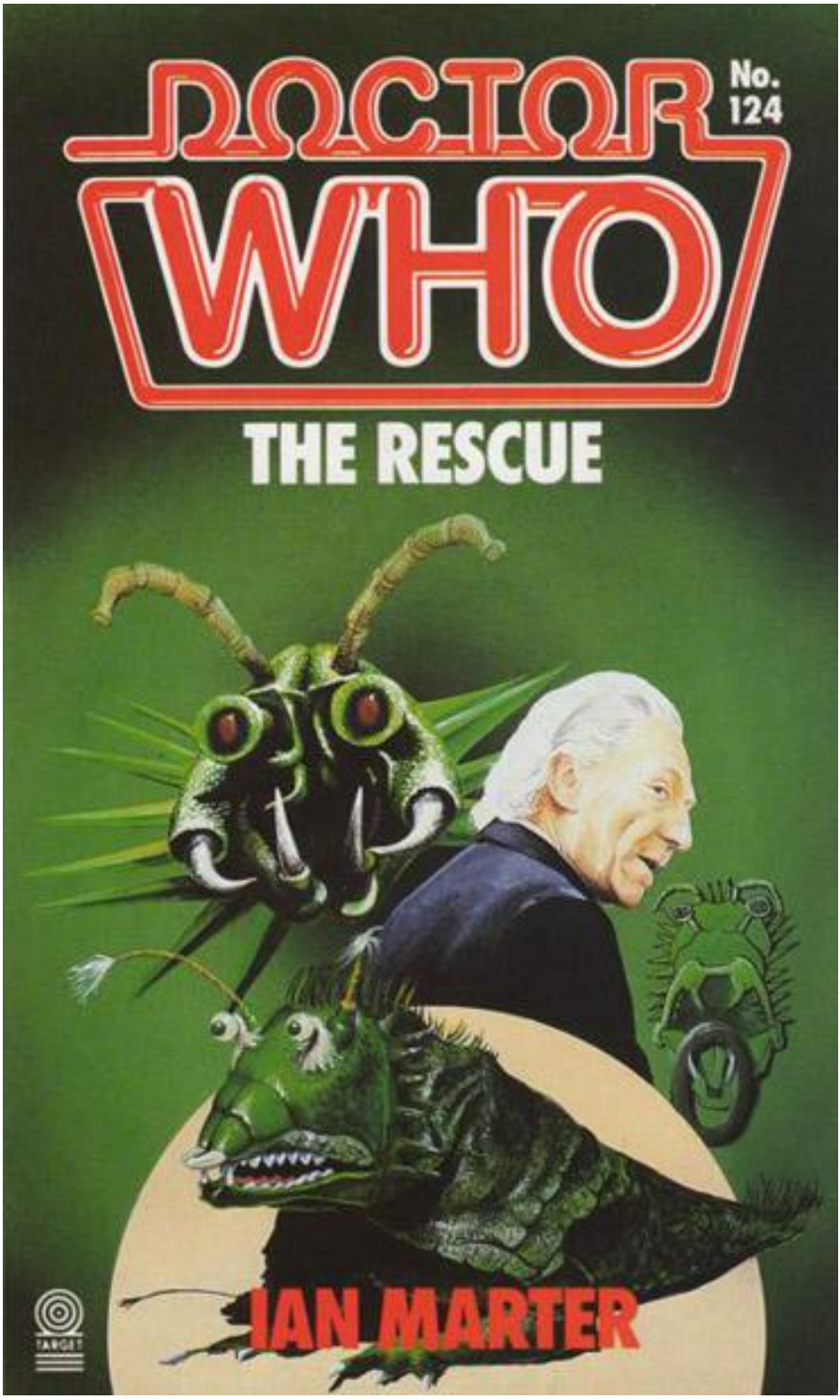
DOCTOR WHO

No. 124

THE RESCUE



IAN MARTER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No. 124
THE RESCUE
IAN MARTER
TARGET

From his one previous visit the Doctor remembers the inhabitants of the planet Dido as a gentle, peace-loving people.

But when he returns, things have changed dramatically. It seems that the Didoi have brutally massacred the crew of the crashed spaceliner Astra. Even now they are threatening the lives of the sole survivors, Bennett and the orphan girl Vicki.

Why have the Didoi apparently turned against their peaceful natures? Can Bennett and Vicki survive until the rescue ship from Earth arrives?

And who is the mysterious Koquillion?

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Shortly after completing work on *The Rescue* Ian Marter died. It was a great loss to his publishers and to the world of *Doctor Who* as a whole. Ian loved his work on *Who* both as an actor and a writer of many of the novelisations of the TV shows. He especially enjoyed and appreciated the interest fans showed in his work. And in his absence, it's to all his fans that I'd like to dedicate this, his last book.

NR

DOCTOR WHO

THE RESCUE

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IAN MARTER

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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Epilogue

Prologue

The huge curved navigation console hummed and its multicoloured displays flashed their tireless sequences of vectors and coordinates, endlessly mottling with garish lights the pale faces which hung disembodied in the semi-darkness of the smooth metal.

Someone sniggered. An elbow clad in glossy white plastic shot out and gouged invisible ribs. ‘Hear that, Oliphant? Sixty-nine!’

Young Trainee Navigator Oliphant turned his head, wincing in the sudden flare of the axion radar scanner. ‘All right, so we have sixty-nine hours to Dido orbit.’

There was a pause.

‘Sixty-nine,’ growled an American voice out of the pulsing gloom.

Oliphant turned back to the reddish ghostly cube of his three-dimensional crossword puzzle shimmering at the focus of its portable hologram plate, and frowned in frustration. ‘Too many letters,’ he snapped defensively, touching a sequence of keys.

There was a laugh from around the curve of the console behind him. Plastic-suited figures nodded and grinned at one another.

Oliphant stared defiantly at the new letters appearing in the appropriate little boxes of the laser grid. ‘I’ve got it.

The answer’s *stranded*. It fits every angle.’

‘Does it, Oliphant? You lucky boy,’ drawled the rich bass American voice.

An older man with a shock of grey hair stood up and leaned over Oliphant’s shoulder to study the puzzle.

‘ *Stranded*... It is oddly appropriate,’ he said quietly.

‘How long have they been on that god-forsaken planet anyhow?’ demanded a gruff voice from the shadows.

The tall grey-haired man zipped up the top of his gleaming white

tunic. ‘Approximately three months, I think,’ he said.

‘Exactly thirteen terrestrial weeks, Commander Smith,’

Oliphant informed him smartly.

‘Thank you, Einstein!’ scoffed the gruff voice.

The distinguished older man held up his hand for attention. ‘We are about to enter the zone of turbulence reported by *Astra Nine* before the accident,’ he reminded them. ‘I want extra vigilance in here from now until orbit is established.’

He turned to the big sprawling American seated at the pilot position in the centre of the crescent-shaped console.

‘Mr Weinberger, keep a close watch on the systems please.

We do not want to find ourselves being thrown out of curvature at the last minute, like those poor devils in *Astra Nine*.’

The sandy-haired American nodded and gave a lazy half-salute. ‘Sure thing, Commander. You can leave it to me,’ he drawled, chewing energetically and grinning red and blue and yellow in the lights of the guidance display as it flashed up a new sequence of vectors in front of him.

Smith glanced briefly around the navigation module and then strode to the wall and passed his hand across a sensor pad. A panel slid noiselessly aside. ‘Wake me at once if there is any problem,’ he ordered. He left the module and the panel slid shut behind him.

Weinberger swung his padded seat around and punched unnecessarily at several keys on the navigation computer.

‘Hell, this has got to be the most boring assignment I’ve landed yet,’ he muttered, staring morosely at the maze of graphics that instantly appeared. He unzipped a pocket on his tunic and took out a fresh sachet of gum. ‘Seems one hell of a way to come just to salvage a couple of emigrants—even if one of them *is* a dame!’

Suddenly Trainee Oliphant leaned forward and frowned at a mass of numbers in one corner of a display.

‘Something is wrong here, Mr Weinberger,’ he exclaimed, his scarcely broken voice cracking hoarsely.

‘You stick to your goddam puzzles,’ snapped the pilot with a contemptuous sneer, chewing the fresh wadge of gum with exaggerated contortions of his thick lips as he punched more keys.

‘There *is* something here, Chief...’ warned the gruff voice in the shadows at one end of the console.

Weinberger swung his chair and squinted through his tinted glasses. His craggy face immediately folded in concern. ‘Must be a fluctuation surge,’ he said with a nervous laugh. ‘We’ve had them before on this trip.’

Oliphant shook his head. ‘This is *not* spurious, Mr Weinberger.’ He pointed to the ominously changing numbers on the screen. ‘We have an intense monopole field somewhere nearby. It is increasing every second.’

‘Check it!’ Weinberger rapped, clearly rattled.

Oliphant touched a rapid sequence of keys on the navigation panel. The display flashed *CHECK RUN* and the, numbers disappeared for a moment. When they reappeared they were even more alarming.

‘The kid’s right,’ said the gruff voice as the other personnel peered over Oliphant’s head. ‘We have a powerful magnetic monopole field and it is closing in around us fast.’

Oliphant swallowed and his prominent Adam’s apple jumped in a spasm of nerves. ‘Perhaps this is what happened to *Astra Nine*,’ he croaked, his scared face bluish in the light from the screens.

Next moment the displays went berserk in brilliant multi-coloured flashes of random graphics and number sequences all over the complex curved console. Then they all blanked out.

No one spoke for a moment. The gaping personnel felt their mouths dry as sand-paper. Their hair prickled and stood on end and their skins felt brittle and crackly as they stared at the dead instruments.

Suddenly Oliphant sprang out of his seat as a livid blue spark spat between his fingers and the computer keyboard.

‘Good God! What was that?’ Weinberger gasped, jumping up and moving away from the console.

The module flooded with an intense blue light and a hollow bellowing

and scraping noise resounded throughout.

‘And what is *that*?’ Oliphant screamed, pointing wildly into the space above the silent console.

The incredulous crew stared at the blurred and hazy oblong shape which was gradually forming in the shimmering air. They covered their ears as the noise rose to an unbearable intensity. After a few seconds, the blinding glare forced them to shut their eyes and turn away, their unprotected hands and faces burning in the dry electric atmosphere.

Suddenly it was silent. The glare vanished. The air felt cold and clammy. Slowly the crew opened their eyes and turned towards the console. The mysterious blue shape had gone and the systems were once again flickering and humming to themselves.

Oliphant gingerly wiped his glistening face and shivered. ‘It... It was.... It was like...’ he stammered, pressing himself against the cold wall. Inside his plastic tunic he was soaked in perspiration.

‘I saw something like it once...’ Weinberger croaked, blinking and shaking his head at the empty space above the console. Pulling himself together, he moved to his seat and checked the instruments.

‘All systems checking out normal,’ he reported in an artificially calm voice. ‘No indications of magnetic anomaly. Routine cross-check.’

Gradually the others resumed their seats, still numb with shock.

‘We establish Dido orbit in sixty-eight point nine hours,’ Weinberger announced, chewing hard.

Once the systems had all been cross-checked, the personnel relaxed a little but hardly spoke. They kept their attention on the quietly functioning instruments, intently watching for any indication of hidden effects from the terrifying upheaval they had just experienced.

After a long time, Trainee Oliphant happened to glance across at his hologram puzzle. He laughed nervously.

‘Whatever it was, it scrambled all the letters...’ he said.

1

The sudden twists of wind seemed to erupt out of nowhere, drawing

up the hot sand in fierce corkscrews of stinging grains which funnelled high into the air before abruptly collapsing in gentle sprinkles as the wind dropped as mysteriously as it had risen.

The air was hot and bone dry. The tawny murk of the sky held no clouds, its monotonous haze broken only by the dull ochre patch where the reddish eye of the planet's nearer sun managed to pierce the dusty atmosphere. And the air was charged with electricity, as if a raging thunderstorm could break out at any moment.

The parched landscape looked as if it would welcome a torrent of rain falling for years and years. Scattered across the wilderness, which was gouged by deep ravines and scarred with crusted lake beds, tall spiny-leaved plants seemed to signal in almost human desperation towards the dimly glowering sun, and wicked thorny shrubs and cacti lurked among the boulders and the jagged flinty scree.

A low ridge of craggy mountains rose abruptly out of the desert plain, its cliffs pockmarked with caves and crevices.

At the foot of the ridge, a series of shattered terraces was just distinguishable under the fallen rock and mounds of choking dust. The broken remains of stone buildings with gaping holes for entrances and windows lay like rows of skulls, half-buried in the white sand. Occasionally, a sudden gust of wind dislodged a loose slab or block and it clattered down in a flurry of thick dust, as if the giant skulls were coming to life again and stirring to speak of the terrible catastrophe they had suffered long ago.

Near the ruins at the base of the steep cliffs lay the wreckage of a colossal black and silver metallic structure. It had been broken into three separate sections which lay roughly in alignment. The huge spherical head and the tail complex of clustered cylinders had originally been connected to opposite ends of the tubular central stem. The spherical head section, which was about fifty metres in diameter, had rolled some distance from the rest of the wreck, ending up with its connecting stump pointing almost vertically. A jagged hole appeared to have been cut in the underside of the sphere close to the ground. The vast tail assembly lay only a few metres from the rear end of the central section. Half-submerged in the sand, with its vast cylinders directed up at an angle, it had obviously driven itself into the ground with enormous power. Several of the cylinders had broken off and stood leaning like silver totems from a religion not yet born.

The central tube itself lay almost horizontal and was split open, just as

if it had been trodden on and kicked aside by some giant foot. From the snapped open angle a huge knot of tangled struts, cables and pipes spewed out in all directions like the guts of a gigantic robot. Now and again, a swirl of wind tugged at the mechanical entrails and made them creak and squeal and thrash the air. Along the tailward end of the tube a large hatch panel stuck out, twisted at right angles to the scorched and pitted hull. On the outside face of the panel was painted a symbol showing a planet in orbit around a star and a spacecraft in orbit around the planet. Nearby on the hull in huge half-obliterated letters was the name *ASTRA NINE*. The dark, empty hatchway looked like the forgotten entrance to a long abandoned tomb.

But among the cracked glassy boulders littered around the wreck there were fresh foot prints in the baking sand, especially near the hatchway. Most of the prints were clearly human. However, others resembled the claw prints of a gigantic bird of prey.

Suddenly a high-pitched noise issued from inside the wreck. It was an urgent pulsing signal, shrill and staccato.

It could almost have been the shriek of some pterodactyl-like creature swooping on its prey. It persisted for several minutes before there was a sudden slithering and sliding sound from the steep scree and a slight, ragged figure came stumbling down from the terraces above the wreck and dived through the hatch, breathless and sweating.

Inside the tubular section, the small figure ran up the gentle sloping floor that had originally formed the wall of the hull and knelt in front of a battered radar console that had obviously been removed from its proper position and installed there by means of a crude tangle of cables and connections. With feverish fingers and tiny gasps of excited anticipation, the young girl adjusted the tuning controls and stared wide-eyed at a sharp pinpoint of light pulsing in one corner of the dusty screen.

The target spot lay behind the fainter outline of the nearby ridge which crossed the screen from one corner to the other. Frowning with concentration, the girl overlaid the range and angular distance vectors.

‘It’s impossible...’ she breathed, brushing the dust out of her eyes. ‘It just can’t be... I would have heard something.’

Her pale, almost fragile face began to crumple with desolate disappointment. She had huge eyes with fine eyebrows arched high at

the outer corners giving her an air of alert surprise. Her short cropped hair, oval face and small mouth suggested Joan of Arc, and her nose was definitely Norman. Her simple short-sleeved dress and her dirty bare feet made her look even more like the Maid of Orleans.

No matter what adjustments her nervously fluttering fingers made at the keyboard, the signal persisted and the range and direction indicator located the target somewhere on the ridge.

Excitement and hope revived in the girl's intense eyes as she watched the ring of the radar trace expand from the centre out to the edge of the screen over and over again like the waves from a stone dropped into a pool. With each pulse, the target blip flashed and bleeped.

She leaned across the chaotic tangle of communications equipment lashed up around the radar scanner and snatched up a microphone headset. She was about to switch on and tune the radio transmitter when she glanced across at the internal hatch set in what had been the ceiling of the chamber. Through the half-open shutter, she could see the light filtering through the maze of debris which spilt out between the broken halves of the hull. She hesitated, as if torn between alternatives, and a shadow of fear momentarily passed over her face. Then she dropped the headset, sprang to her feet and scrambled through the internal hatchway.

She pushed her way through the jungle of wreckage cluttering the intermediate chamber towards one of a number of internal hatches in what had originally been the floor of the upper or forward section of the hull. The hatch was closed. She hammered on the hollow-sounding shutter with her fists.

'Bennett... Bennett!' she called in a small, tremulous voice. 'Bennett, the rescue craft has arrived already!' There was no reply.

The girl tried to squeeze her thin fingers between the edge of the shutter and its buckled frame. 'Bennett, please let me in!' she shouted, her voice suddenly breaking with hysteria. 'Let me in, the *Seeker* has landed!'

There was a pause and then a sharp click and the hatch slid aside a few centimetres. Seizing the edge, the girl leaned on it with all her strength. Slowly the shutter opened and she slipped warily through.

She entered a small compartment which had been made into makeshift living quarters squeezed in amidst a mass of complex control and guidance equipment. In a corner there was a simple metal

bunk furnished with a cellular mattress and a blanket, and on the curved floor beside it sat a plastic beaker and jug containing discoloured water.

Fitted to what had once been the compartment ceiling at the end of the bunk, a domed object emitted a feeble fluorescent light. On the bunk lay a large man. His long black hair reached almost to his shoulders and he wore a beard trimmed in the Spanish style. His piercing eyes were dark beneath thick prominent brows and his sallow, pockmarked face had high cheekbones and a strong chin.

His nose looked as if it had been broken. His bulky frame was crammed into a round-necked tunic and trousers made of a synthetic material. The trousers were tucked into rugged, unfastened boots.

As the girl tentatively approached the bunk, the man heaved himself into a half-sitting position. ‘What is the problem?’ he demanded, his hoarse voice remote with exhaustion. Before she could respond the man jerked his head towards the plastic jug. ‘Give me a drink.’

The girl handed him the beaker. ‘The *Seeker* has landed.

It’s on the radar,’ she said breathlessly. ‘It’s here at last, Bennett. Isn’t that wonderful? We can go home now.’

Bennett almost choked on the brackish, oily liquid.

‘Impossible. It cannot be the *Seeker*,’ he snapped brutally, staring at the sand at the bottom of the beaker. ‘You are dreaming again.’

The girl seized his arm in a frenzy. ‘Listen, you can hear it on the radar!’ she insisted, kneeling almost in supplication.

Bennett frowned as he heard the persistent bleep from the equipment in the main compartment. The girl did not notice the sudden fear veiled in his dark eyes. He shook his head. ‘It is a fault. It has to be a fault,’ he told her. ‘Did you establish radio contact?’

The girl shook her head. ‘I was just going to... but I wanted to come and tell you first.’ Her face looked trusting and innocent. ‘Bennett, I thought you would be so pleased.’

Bennett thrust the empty beaker at her. ‘Did you see it?’

he demanded. ‘Did you hear it land?’

‘No, but it *is* here. I know it is. It’s on the screen,’ she insisted with pathetic desperation. ‘Come and look, Bennett. I’ll help you,’ she said, tugging at his arm like a small child.

Bennett snatched his arm away. ‘They could not find us without the radio beacon,’ he retorted. ‘You know we cannot activate that until they establish orbit. Our power cells are almost exhausted as it is. We are lucky we have any power at all.’ He gripped her thin wrist in his huge hand. ‘Now go and switch off the radar before we run the cells out completely.’

The girl’s eyes brimmed with tears. ‘But why won’t you believe me?’ she cried. ‘It’s so near... Somewhere up on the ridge... We should almost be able to see it.’

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ Bennett scoffed. ‘The thing landed without making a sound, did it?’

The girl thought about this and fell silent.

Bennett attempted a sympathetic smile and leaned towards her. ‘Vicki, I know how badly you want to escape from this god-forsaken place. We both want to get away; but it is no good pretending. The *Seeker* may not arrive for a very long time. You must face reality.’

Vicki stared at the water jug and said nothing.

‘Go and radio the *Seeker*,’ Bennett suggested out of the blue.

Vicki gazed at him eagerly, like a dog being offered a titbit.

‘You will not get an answer yet, but if it will make you feel any better go and try,’ Bennett said kindly.

Vicki wiped her eyes and nodded. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured. She stood up and moved to the hatchway.

Bennett’s face hardened again as he watched her. ‘And Vicki...’

She paused without turning. She knew what was coming and her frail body stiffened with apprehension.

‘Vicki, watch out for Koquillion.’

She nodded again and gave a little shudder. ‘I... I have not seen... him today,’ she said in a tiny voice.

‘He will be around somewhere,’ Bennett reminded her.

‘And he knows nothing about the *Seeker*. Do not forget that. He must not find out.’

Vicki shivered again. ‘I know.’

‘So be very careful, Vicki. If Koquillion were to find out he would kill us both.’

With her back to Bennett, Vicki could not see the tormenting gleam in his eyes. She bit her lip. ‘I will be careful,’ she promised. Then she slipped out, sliding the shutter behind her as best she could.

Bennett sank back onto his bunk, but he no longer looked exhausted. A faint grin puckered the corners of his full mouth and his big body shook with silent satisfied laughter.

Vicki returned to the main compartment, all the excitement drained from her. She stared at her own metal bunk and then at the rows and rows of colourful crystalline rock fragments she had collected and arranged around the compartment on struts and pipes and on the assortment of equipment that had been brought there after the accident.

Suddenly all her efforts to create a little refuge for herself looked dismal and pathetic. Even the glittering mineral crystals looked dull and pointless. She glanced at the pulsing radar scanner and then went slowly across to the exterior hatchway and looked out across the barren ridge and the deserted sand-clogged ruins. Bennett was right.

There was no sign of any rescue craft anywhere. Only the endless arid waste.

She went back to the radar scanner and contemplated the pulsing pinpoint. Then she picked up the headset and switched on the transmitters. She selected the channel and tuned the equipment as carefully as her fumbling fingers allowed. Then she spoke slowly and distinctly into the microphone: ‘ *Astra Nine* to *Seeker*... *Astra Nine* to *Seeker*...

Do you copy?’

She listened to the hollow hiss of the earpiece with a sinking heart. After a while she adjusted the fine tuning and repeated her call. ‘ *Seeker* this is Planet Dido... Do you copy? Please indentify.’ She

switched off the radar audio signal to reduce the interference and knelt by the scanner listening to the meaningless noise of the universe in the headset.

All at once she heard a faint bleep followed by a distant but clear voice: ‘ *Seeker* to *Astra Nine*... Contact confirmed...

Go ahead please.’

Hardly believing her ears, Vicki adjusted the microphone closer to her lips. ‘ *Seeker*... Have you landed?’ she cried. ‘Have you landed?’

In her excitement she forgot about the transmission lag and she was repeating her message when the rescue craft’s reply came through: ‘Negative, *Astra Nine*... We have sixty-eight terrestrial hours to Dido orbit... Distance one million nine hundred and ninety-three thousand kilometres...

Velocity mean at thirty-three thousand seven hundred kilometres per hour... In deceleration mode...’

‘But you must be mistaken,’ Vicki protested. ‘I have your signal on radar in front of me...’

There was another thirteen second pause and Vicki knew in her heart that she must be wrong. The delay in messages proved that the *Seeker* was still far from Dido.

‘Listen, *Astra Nine*... Conserve your power...’ came the reply. ‘We shall contact you on establishing orbit... Repeat, conserve your power... We shall require your beacon to locate you on the surface... *Seeker* breaking contact now...

Will call you in approximately sixty hours...’ There was another bleep and then silence.

Vicki stayed kneeling by the scanner listening to the hiss in the headphones and watching the mysterious blip on the screen. Then, remembering Bennett’s order and the advice from the *Seeker* to save power, she switched off the equipment and took off the headset.

She wandered over to the exterior hatchway and gazed up at the jagged ridge shimmering in the heat. ‘If the *Seeker* is sixty-eight hours away...’ she murmured, shivering again as if feeling a chill, ‘... then what is that out there on the mountain?’

2

Out of sight, in a large cave hidden inside the scree-strewn cliff which towered above the ruined settlement, there stood a bulky blue box. Its faded paintwork was chipped and the frosted windows around its top were cracked and filthy. Thick layers of dust clogged the ledges of its battered panelling, giving the object an air of great antiquity.

Only a dimly flashing yellow beacon on its roof suggested that the thing had any connection with the technological age. Its light threw eerie shadows which flitted across the craggy cavern walls. Otherwise it resembled a forgotten shrine to some barely remembered god, buried in a lost holy place.

But inside, the box was spacious, brightly lit and spotlessly clean. In the middle stood a low, hexagonal structure like an altar. It consisted of six angled panels sloping up to a wide transparent cylinder in the centre, all supported on a slimmer hexagonal podium.

The sloping panels bristled with buttons, keys, switches and all kinds of instrumentation, while the central cylinder was packed with a tangle of fluorescent tubes and delicate microcircuitry. The structure hummed and buzzed quietly while the cylinder fell with solemn dignity to a final halt.

Its contents oscillated slowly to and fro.

The white walls of the chamber were featureless, except for several sections composed of circular panelling, and a dark screen set in one of the walls. The wide gleaming space around the central mechanism was almost bare.

There was an old wooden coat-stand with a hat, a walking stick and an Edwardian frock coat hanging from its branches. Nearby stood a flimsy wooden armchair in which an old man sat fast asleep with his head thrown back, snoring gently.

Facing each other across the humming mechanism stood a young man and a young woman. Their faces were anxious as they scanned the maze of instruments.

Occasionally they cast nervous glances at the forbidding figure in the chair.

‘That was quite a jolt, Ian!’ the young woman laughed uneasily. ‘I think we must have had a near miss or something. Let’s hope we’ve

materialised safely after all!'

The young man gave her a relieved smile. 'Yes, I think we've landed in one piece, Barbara. I must say I was scared this time. It's not like the Doctor to sleep through a landing, is it!'

Barbara shook her head. She was a slim shapely woman with a mass of thick black hair worn in the high lacquered style of the 1960s. She had strong features, with firmly arched eyebrows and a wide mouth. Her tightly fitting black cardigan and slacks gave her a rather formal, austere air which matched her direct, independent manner. She marched over to the chair and put her hand on the old man's shoulder.

Ian frowned suspiciously at the instruments on the control pedestal. He too was slim, but his dark hair was trimmed short with a neat parting in the mod style. His regular features gave him a somewhat conventional look, but his bright eyes suggested determination and a touch of mischief. In his short jacket and narrow tapered trousers he looked rather like a bank clerk.

The Doctor snorted, stirred in his chair and then opened his eyes and sat abruptly upright, squinting sleepily around him. 'What's the matter, Susan? What's happened?' he exclaimed anxiously.

The Doctor appeared to be in his late sixties. His long, snow white hair was brushed severely back from his proud, hawkish face. His grey eyes were pale but fiercely intense and his thin lips drew down at the corners in a disapproving way. The imperious effect of his beaklike nose, which gave him a rather remote and superior air was accentuated by his hollow cheeks and his flaring nostrils.

But his clothes were shabby. He wore a starched wing collar shirt with a meticulously-tied cravat, a brocaded waistcoat and a pair of sharply creased checked trousers.

The Doctor gazed inquiringly at Barbara. 'Well, where *is* Susan?' he demanded sharply. Then he seemed to recollect himself. 'Good gracious me, did I fall asleep?'

Ian smiled sarcastically. 'You certainly did – and at a very critical time, Doctor. I hope you're feeling the better for it.'

The Doctor stood up yawning and rubbing his eyes. 'Ah yes indeed... The arms of Morpheus!' he said. 'Well, dear me, I suppose I had better go and have a wash.'

Barbara pointed to the humming pedestal. ‘Doctor, the shaking and the groaning have stopped.’

The Doctor smiled sympathetically. ‘Have they? Good, I’m so glad you are feeling better now, my dear.’

‘No, no, no, Doctor... I mean the TARDIS has stopped.

We went through the most awful upheaval just now.’

The Doctor yawned again and nodded. ‘Yes, of course.

The TARDIS. How stupid of me!’

Ian sniffed rather disapprovingly. ‘Doctor, we seem to have landed while you were fast asleep!’ he said.

The Doctor frowned. ‘ *Materialised* would be a more suitable expression, my dear Chesterton,’ he chided. ‘Good.

All we have to do now is turn everything off.’ He shuffled across to the pedestal and studied the mass of instruments.

‘Well, wherever we are it appears to be a nice warm day outside,’ he announced cheerfully, and fiddled with several knobs and switches.

The oscillating column in the centre of the pedestal sank and came to rest with a weary whine.

Stifling yet another yawn, the Doctor shuffled round the silent mechanism. ‘Oh dear me, I do beg your pardons.

Must be getting old...’ he muttered, peering at a set of dials.

‘Yes, it looks most promising out there. I think we should take a look.’

Barbara and Ian exchanged a wry glance.

The Doctor pressed a key and the screen on the wall flickered into life showing a dark, shadowy image in which nothing much was recognisable except for the flashing reflection from the beacon on the TARDIS roof.

‘Doesn’t look at all promising if you ask me,’ Ian objected. ‘It’s jolly dark. Can’t make anything out. Looks sort of rocky.’

The Doctor grinned sardonically. ‘Yes, Chesterton. We might be in a

hole... or under the sea... or in a cave!' he cried with obvious relish.

Barbara caught hold of the edge of the pedestal. 'You mean we could be trapped, Doctor?'

The Doctor threw up his hands in protest. 'Why do you humans always expect the worst?' he exclaimed irritably.

'It does not mean anything of the kind, young lady. You know very well that the TARDIS can pass through solid matter. We can dematerialise again whenever we wish.'

'Then I suggest that we do just that,' Ian muttered churlishly. Both he and Barbara had grown wary of the experiences likely to await them when they arrived somewhere in the the Doctor's Time And Relative Dimensions In Space machine.

The Doctor looked down his nose. 'I think we might just step outside for a moment. Get a little fresh air. After all, you young people need exercise!' he declared roguishly.

'Open the door, Susan!'

As soon as he had uttered the name of his granddaughter, the Doctor blinked, glanced quickly at the others and then gave a sad little smile of embarrassment.

'How very stupid of me...' he muttered, blinking again and grasping the edge of the pedestal. 'Of course, Susan is no longer with us.' His face hardened as he battled to resist the urge to give way to his emotions. He turned away.

There was an awkward silence.

Barbara cleared her throat. 'Doctor, why don't you show *me* how to do it?' she suggested gently.

The Doctor turned sharply. 'What a good idea, Barbara!'

he said gratefully. 'That switch there – just twist it clockwise.'

Barbara did as he said and the door opened with a grating buzz.

The Doctor nodded. 'Very good.' Then he gave her a mischievous smile. 'But do not try to do it when we are in *transit*,' he warned. Shaking off his sadness, he strode over to the coatstand and took down the frock coat.

Barbara ran over to help him on with it. Then, while the Doctor adjusted the cravat under his awkward wing collar, she threw Ian a pleading look. Ian smiled and nodded and with a shrug of resignation followed Barbara and the Doctor to the door.

'You were quite right, Doctor. We *are* in a cave,' Ian said stepping cautiously into the dusty shadows.

Barbara sniffed the air suspiciously before leaving the bright security of the police box. 'Strange sort of smell though. It's not like anything on Earth,' she pointed out warily.

Ian groaned and glanced at the Doctor. 'Don't tell us it's not Earth,' he pleaded despairingly. 'So much for getting us home!'

The Doctor bent down to pick up an handful of the coarse colourful sand which covered the cavern floor. He sniffed it and pondered a moment. 'It might not be Earth,'

he agreed, peering at the glittering grains in the feeble flashing light from the TARDIS's beacon. 'But I do seem to recognise the olfactory characteristics.'

'Can you identify it?' Barbara asked anxiously.

The Doctor let the sand run through his fingers, studying the sparkling trickle intently as it floated onto the toe of his boot. 'More or less...' he mumbled vaguely, obviously reluctant to admit that he was baffled, or that he had made a navigational error. He yawned exaggeratedly, rubbed his eyes and turned back to the doorway of the police box. 'You two young things have a little wander around. But do not stray too far. We have not had much luck with caves on our travels together so far.'

'What are you going to do?' demanded Barbara.

'I think I shall go-back inside for another little nap...'

the Doctor replied absently, shuffling through the door and disappearing.

'A nap! That's a new one!' Ian snorted. 'Usually he's the first to go off poking his nose into things and causing trouble! And what about taking us home, Barbara? I don't think the old fool's got a clue where we are this time.'

Barbara stared apprehensively around the dark, dusty cavern and then shrugged. ‘Perhaps he’s just tired,’ she suggested, trying to sound unconcerned.

‘Well, he’s certainly not getting any younger, is he! He’s never slept through a *landing* before.’

The hinges on the TARDIS door creaked as the Doctor poked his head out. ‘ *Materialisation*,’ he corrected sternly.

‘Chesterton, I may be getting on a bit, but I am not deaf. I can hear everything you say. Pass me that chunk of rock, please.’

Blushing with shame, Ian handed the Doctor a large irregular lump of glassy rock lying by his foot. With a curt nod, the old man ducked back into the police box and slammed the door.

‘I think it’s probably Susan...’ Barbara explained quietly, trying to smooth Ian’s ruffled feelings. ‘He probably wants just to be alone for a while in the TARDIS with all his memories. I mean, we can’t expect him to say goodbye to Susan in a different time, and then shrug it off just like that.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ Ian agreed grudgingly, turning and wandering cautiously towards a pale patch of light which looked as if it might lead to the mouth of the cave.

‘Anyway, I wonder what Susan’s up to now?’

Barbara laughed. ‘Learning to milk cows I expect,’ she said. ‘I hope she’ll be happy. David seemed a nice boy.’ She followed Ian as he felt his way round a huge buttress of crumbling rock.

‘I think this will take us outside,’ Ian said, leading the way through a short narrow tunnel that twisted and turned like a maze.

They could feel a hot dry breeze blowing on their faces and the light grew rapidly stronger. ‘At least the sun’s out by the look of things!’ Barbara cried cheerfully, seizing Ian’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s find out where we are!’

As they vanished along the tunnel, the cave behind them was suddenly disturbed by a scrabbling, scraping sound and by the muffled hiss of slow, laboured breathing.

Something moved in the darkness between the back of the police box

and the wall of the cavern. Sand was kicked up and small rocks and stones dislodged and scattered across the dusty floor. Then the rough surface of the wall itself seemed to stir and move forward, as if some ancient effigy had come alive and was preparing to stalk out into the light.

The huge shape lurched awkwardly along the side of the TARDIS and emerged into the flashing strobe of the beacon in a sequence of monstrous staggers. It walked on two legs like a human, but its horrific head was like the head of some gigantic bird of prey or some colossal insect combined into an almost mechanical hybrid by an evil genius. Its great globular eyes glowed red, protruding at the end of thick tubular stalks. Its domed skull bristled with stubby antennae, some sharply pointed like probes or stings, others gaping open like suckers. The creature's beak was guarded by two enormous horizontal fangs curving inwards from the sides of its squat, segmented neck. The horny carapace of its body glistened as if it weresweating a viscous oily gum. Its long simian arms ended in vicious pincers like the claws of a crustacean, while its feet were also clawlike but much larger, scouring and ripping the sandy floor with convulsive ferocity. The thing's raucous breath seemed to issue from flapping leathery lips, forced through congested chambers and strangled tubing deep within the armoured chest.

The creature stopped to examine the silent police box.

Its glowing eyes tried to penetrate the dimly illuminated frosted panes. Its huge claws gripped the door and tried to tear it open. Then, with a menacing hiss, it swung itself round to face the tunnel, cocking its hideous head as if listening for its prey. Lifting its huge hooked feet high in the air with each jerking step, it slowly stalked across the cavern and entered the tunnel in pursuit of Barbara and Ian.

3

Blinking and coughing, Barbara and Ian stumbled out into the light, their throats rasping with the dust they had stirred up in the tunnel. Screwing up their eyes, they stood on the small plateau at the tunnel mouth and looked out over the deserted arid landscape which stretched far away into the hot hazy distance.

'It doesn't look too promising, does it!' said Barbara, echoing Ian's words in the TARDIS earlier as she shook the dust off her hair.

Ian leaned over the steep precipice. 'Look at that!' he exclaimed. 'It

looks like ruins and some kind of wreckage at the bottom of the cliff'

Barbara held onto his arm and cautiously peered over the edge. The vast silver and black wreck of the *Astra Nine* was awesome, like a gigantic metallic building that had fallen in an earthquake.

'It must have crashed here,' Barbara murmured in amazement. 'I've only seen spaceships like that in pictures.'

Ian stared down at the shattered terraces below them.

'Perhaps it didn't crash, Barbara. It might have been destroyed on the ground with the buildings.'

'There's something printed on the side, Ian.' Barbara shaded her eyes. 'But I can't quite make it out.' She looked unenthusiastically at the horizon. 'So it Iooks like Earth after all, I suppose. But when? There's no sign of life anywhere.'

Ian shrugged. 'Wherever or whenever we are, there must be people or... or things somewhere around.' He walked gingerly along the crumbling ledge, trying to see the half-buried ruins more clearly.

'Are we going to tell the Doctor about the ruins and the wreckage?'

Ian stopped. 'Yes of course. Why shouldn't we?'

'Knowing him, he'll insist on going down there to investigate,' Barbara objected.

'And why not? I'd agree with him for once. If the crew of that wreck are alive down there, surely we should...'

Barbara's short shrill scream froze the words on Ian's lips. He swung round, almost overbalancing, and saw her staring in dumb horror at the mouth of the tunnel. Then he gasped in shock as something stirred in the entrance to the cave and the monstrous creature emerged.

In the ruddy light from the sun the apparition looked even more terrible, its talons gleaming like bloodstained scimitars. It stared at the humans in turn, its breath rasping in snatched spasms.

Suddenly it spoke. 'You are stangers here...' The croaking voice seemed to come not from its flapping beak but from deep inside its carapace. 'Where do you belong?

Do you come from Earth?'

Barbara glanced at Ian. He nodded. ‘Yes, we do,’ she said faintly.

The creature swung its nightmare head from side to side and sliced the air with its claws. ‘Then by what means did you travel here? Where is your craft?’

Ian stepped boldly forward and took Barbara’s trembling hand. ‘You must have seen it. It is there in the cave,’ he replied, his voice wobbling with suppressed fear.

The creature paused, its red eyes glowing malevolently.

‘You travelled here in that... that ancient artefact?’

Barbara gripped Ian’s hand tightly. ‘Yes, we did.’ She struggled to sound casual, but her voice quavered. ‘We realise it must sound fantastic, but we have no reason to lie to you.’

Ian gave her hand a congratulatory squeeze.

The alien creature half-turned towards the cave, as if to consider their explanation. Then it swung back to face them. ‘Are you the only personnel, or are there others?’

‘Yes, there’s the Doctor,’ Ian blurted out before Barbara could stop him.

The monster’s head jerked with sudden interest. ‘A doctor?’

Ian gave Barbara an apologetic look. ‘Yes, he’s in the TARDIS,’ he added shamefacedly.

The creature nodded slowly. ‘I must meet this doctor,’ it rasped. ‘I will conduct you all to our citadel.’ It gestured towards the tunnel with a scything motion of its claw.

Barbara and Ian knew they had no choice. Short of hurling themselves over the cliff there was no escape. After a mutual smile of encouragement, they stepped forward obediently.

But the creature raised a talon, barring Barbara’s path.

‘Not you!’ it rasped. ‘You remain here.’

Swallowing her fear, Barbara bravely retreated a step.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ian told her out of the side of his mouth.

‘I shan’t be long.’ Patting her arm, he edged past the grotesquely gesticulating creature and entered the tunnel.

But instead of escorting Ian into the cave, the hideous spectre began to advance on Barbara. She backed away towards the precipice, mesmerised by the flaring red eyes.

‘What is the matter?’ the thing demanded harshly.

‘What are you afraid of?’

Barbara hoped against hope that Ian would have the sense to rush into the cavern and warn the Doctor while the monster was distracted. ‘Keep away from me!’ she gasped, edging ever closer to the gaping drop behind her.

‘I am a friend,’ the thing assured her. ‘You can trust me.’

‘Can I?’ Barbara whimpered in desperation, craning to see if Ian had done as she hoped he would. There was no sign of him in the tunnel entrance.

She was just about to attempt to dive past the grasping talons and make a bid to reach the tunnel herself when the creature suddenly reached out and seized her arm.

Shrieking with terror, Barbara struggled to get free, but the sharp claws cut into her flesh. She recoiled in disgust as she felt the hot stale breath on her face. Relentlessly she was propelled backwards ever closer to the precipice, her assailant’s pustular antennae quivering only centimetres from her cheeks. Powerless to resist, she felt the crumbling lip of the ledge under her heels and the next moment she was flung off the cliff with a savage sweep of the creature’s powerful arm. She fell headlong down the steep scree, her dying scream echoing briefly among the ruins far below.

The creature goggled over the precipice at its brutal handiwork for a moment. Then it turned towards the tunnel entrance with a vicious hiss of satisfaction, raising in its claws a kind of rectangular club about seventy centimetres long. The weapon’s head consisted of a ring of lenses and at the thinner end there was a small control grip with trigger and primer buttons and a liquid crystal sight.

Despite its awkward pincers, the creature seemed able to manipulate the delicate adjustments quite successfully. It directed the lens head at the tunnel mouth and took careful aim with one globular red eye.

The Doctor peered intently at the translucent chunk of rock Ian had given him, his eye hugely enlarged in the lens of the old-fashioned brass-handled magnifying glass. From time to time he consulted a dog-eared notebook on the control pedestal beside him, nodding and muttering to himself as he compared the specimen with the data scrawled untidily in the book. Eventually he shook his head in frustration at the barely decipherable notes.

Plonking the magnifying glass on the control panel, he delved into his coat pocket and unearthed a pair of halfmoon spectacles. He slipped them onto the end of his nose and tried again. But it was no better. Clicking his tongue with irritation he snatched off the spectacles, picked up the magnifying glass again and held the notebook at arm's length, screwing up his eyes into tiny points.

Still unsuccessful, the Doctor stuck the spectacles back on his nose and peered through the magnifying glass as well, moving the notebook to and fro in a vain attempt to decode his own atrocious handwriting. Finally, with an exasperated sigh he flung the lot onto the control pedestal.

'My handwriting gets worse and worse...' he complained to the empty TARDIS, massaging his tired eyes behind the spectacles, his nostrils flaring with annoyance. He mooched around the pedestal several times, his head bowed, fiddling with the fob of his watch chain. Then he stopped and squared his shoulders resolutely.

'I really must stop moping about Susan!' he told himself sternly.

He picked up the chunk of rock and studied it for a long time. At last he put it down carefully on the control panel, his mind made up. 'Not a shred of doubt,' he announced to the deserted chamber. 'We have materialised on the planet Dido... Thirteenth planet in the rotating binary star system Proxima Gemini in the Galaxy Moore Eleven, Subcluster Tel... Remarkable! I'm so looking forward to meeting these friendly, civilised creatures again after so many years.'

The Doctor stood staring up at the murky image on the monitor screen. Then he sighed ruefully. 'I do not imagine there is any point in my telling Chesterton that I brought them here intentionally,' he mused. 'No, no, no, of course not. I was fast asleep, was I not? Pity.' Brushing his dusty hands carelessly on his lapels, the Doctor took off his spectacles and slipped them into his pocket together with the notebook.

He was just about to settle himself in the armchair for a peaceful nap when there was a sudden frantic hammering on the door. Glancing at the screen, the Doctor saw Ian's pale and frightened face distorted into a bulbous mask.

'Doctor... Doctor... For heaven's sake open the door!'

Ian yelled, his eyes huge with panic.

'I wonder what he's done with young Barbara...' the Doctor muttered hurrying to the controls and operating the door switch.

All at once the TARDIS shook violently and then rocked drunkenly from side to side. The Doctor winced as he heard the thump of falling rocks bouncing off the frail wooden structure. The image on the scanner screen was obliterated as a storm of sand and dust erupted in the cavern. Next moment the sound of a massive explosion flung open the door and sent a whirlwind of sand and splintered rock into the chamber. The Doctor clung to the control pedestal, more out of concern for his precious machine than for his own safety, until the police box finally settled back onto an even keel.

Coughing and choking, he staggered to the door and tried to see through the swirling dust. 'Chesterton? Where are you? Are you all right? I can't see a thing!' he spluttered, shaking his head to try and stop the awful ringing in his partially deafened ears.

There was no reply: only the clatter of crumbling rock and the trickling rain of settling sand all around.

The Doctor ran back inside, rummaged behind a panel in the wall and unearthed a powerful torch. He returned and, guided by its intense beam, he began to search the area around the police box, kicking in feeble desperation at the fallen rock scattered everywhere and calling Ian's name over and over again. Eventually the torchbeam picked out Ian's spreadeagled body lying among boulders against the far wall of the cavern.

The Doctor scrambled over. 'Chesterton! What happened? Are you all right?' he gabbled anxiously, kneeling beside the motionless figure half-buried under the debris.

Ian opened his eyes and then groggily struggled into a sitting position. 'Barbara...' he croaked weakly, cradling his aching head in his hands.

'Where is she?' cried the Doctor, directing the torchbeam around the

partly demolished cave.

Ian painfully extricated his legs from underneath the stones and tried to remember. ‘She... she was outside... on the cliff...’ he mumbled, still dazed and shocked.

The Doctor helped him to his feet. ‘As soon as you have got your breath back, we shall go and find her,’ he said, dusting off Ian’s jacket. ‘The whole roof seems to have collapsed over there...’

Ian stared along the torchbeam at the impenetrable wall of fallen rock. ‘It’s completely blocked the tunnel, Doctor!’

he gasped, clasping the Doctor’s sleeve. ‘I’m afraid Barbara’s been...’ He winced with pain and tried to relax his wrenched spine.

‘I hope there will not be any further falls,’ the Doctor muttered grimly, turning to glance at the battered police box. ‘I fear the TARDIS could not stand up to too much more of this sort of treatment.’

‘I don’t think *I* could either,’ Ian complained bitterly, trying to gather his shattered wits. ‘Listen, Doctor, I don’t think this was an accident.’

The Doctor shone the torch in Ian’s face and peered at him anxiously, unsure of the young man’s state of mind.

‘Not an accident? What on Earth do you mean?’

Ian clung to the Doctor’s arm for support and struggled to collect his thoughts. ‘Well, there was this... outside the cave we met this... it came up behind us...’ he mumbled helplessly.

‘ *It* came up behind you? What came up behind you?’

demanded the Doctor impatiently.

‘This thing... It was horrible... Hideous... With a face like one of those Aztec mask things... But it was alive... It spoke to us...’

The Doctor nodded mysteriously to himself. ‘With red eyes and talons and sabre fangs...’

Ian nodded eagerly. Then he stared wide-eyed at the Doctor. ‘Yes, but how did you know?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘This is the planet Dido, Chesterton. I have been here before. In fact, I know it quite well. The inhabitants are

extremely hospitable.'

Ian looked aghast. ' *Hospitable!* Well, this thing certainly wasn't at all hospitable! It ordered me to come and fetch you while it forced poor Barbara to stay outside...' he protested, his words falling over one another as his memory grew clearer. 'Then when I came into the cave there was this terrific bang and the tunnel collapsed behind me..

Thoughtfully the Doctor shone the torch slowly round the cave, while Ian, finding his strength gradually returning, staggered across to the huge mound of debris brought down by the explosion and started trying to shift the rocks blocking the tunnel. But after only a few seconds'

breathless struggle, he collapsed exhaused.

'It's no good, we shall have to find another way out of here,' the Doctor told him, still shining the torch around the walls. 'Assuming, of course, that there is one,' he added pessimistically. 'This figure who accosted you, Chesterton, was it armed?' The Doctor suddenly inquired.

Ian thought for a moment. But even thinking proved painful. 'I... I don't think so... Oh yes, Doctor...' Ian held up his hands. 'It was carrying a sort of club thing with crystals or something at the end... It was about this long.'

The Doctor compressed his lips and nodded. 'That could account for it,' he muttered with a preoccupied air.

'The last time I visited this planet the Didoi were just perfecting a portable sonic laser for use in engineering projects.'

Ian groaned and frowned at the rockfall. 'Some engineering!'

There was a brief silence.

'Now, how are you feeling?' asked the Doctor with sudden briskness.

'Not too bad, thanks.'

The Doctor stretched out a hand. 'Well, don't just lie there groaning! Let us get started!'

With the Doctor's help Ian hauled himself back onto his feet.

'At least there do not appear to be any broken bones,'

the Doctor declared, tugging his hand free and striding purposefully towards the TARDIS.

Ian dusted himself down. ‘Thanks, Doctor, that’s the most thorough medical check-up I’ve ever had in my life!’

he said, scowling resentfully.

The old man was busy investigating a deep narrow crevice almost hidden behind the police box. ‘I have never claimed to be an expert in Hippocratic affairs,’ he retorted, probing the niche with the penetrating torchbeam. ‘Do come along, my boy. I think this may be our only chance of finding Barbara.’

Ian stumbled through the settling dust to join him. ‘Did you say the inhabitants of this planet were hospitable?’

The Doctor manoeuvred himself into the fissure and shone the beam of the torch ahead along the dark defile.

‘Extremely friendly. One of the most civilised species I have ever encountered. Now, do come along, Chesterton!’

His faraway voice echoed down the tunnel.

Ian squeezed himself through the crevice. ‘Well, on first acquaintance with them I think I’ll take the Daleks anyday,’ he retorted, catching up and shoving brusquely past the Doctor where the twisting gully suddenly widened for a metre or two. ‘Come along, Doctor, we’ve got to find Barbara quickly. I think your friendly inhabitants have forgotten their old-fashioned good manners!’

Gaping in astonishment at Ian’s remarkable recovery, the Doctor followed, shining the torch ahead of them. ‘Do be careful, my boy!’ he warned.

‘Don’t worry, I will...’ Ian said over his shoulder. ‘These Didoi things are obviously jolly dangerous.’ As they made their way cautiously along the musty, tortuous chasm which led deeper and deeper into the mountain the torch beam cast huge monstrous shadows on the walls around them. The Doctor stared thoughtfully at Ian’s back. ‘But I wonder why...’ he said after a long silence. ‘What can have happened to change their nature so profoundly?’

Before Ian could reply, a thunderous rasping bellow reverberated around them, almost as if the sides of the ravine were grating together

in protest at their intrusion.

Ian stopped in his tracks and the Doctor careered into him and dropped the torch. It went out. The awesome sound had a shrill cutting edge that suggested the cry of some fantastic mechanical animal constructed by a mad subterranean Frankenstein.

They stood in the dusty darkness listening to the long dying echoes. Ian backed against the rock wall. ‘Perhaps we’re just about to find out, Doctor...’ he whispered.

4

Chalk white and motionless, Barbara lay spreadeagled at the bottom of the cliff’, half-buried in a pile of rubble that had once been a simple but elegant dwelling. In one hand she still gripped the stem of a small thorn tree which she had managed to grab as she careered helplessly down the almost vertical scree. Her face and her hands were covered in scratches and bruises and dried blood, and one cheek was swollen like a huge purple fruit. Her clothes were torn and filthy and it would have been impossible for any observer to tell whether she was still breathing.

Then the sand and glassy stones nearby were scuffed aside as something approached and stood staring down at her, breathing heavily. Despite the pale curtain of haze across the reddish sun, a long shadow was cast across her inert body. It was like an image of Death itself.

The thorn tree was twisted out of her fist. Her arms were seized and she was dragged off the mound of debris and down onto the burning rock-strewn plateau. The shadow’s breathing became faster and more laboured as it hauled her through the prickly scrub, as if it was struggling to get its prey safely into its lair before any rival beast could rob it.

Keeping an anxious eye on the exterior hatchway, Vicki hurriedly finished arranging the blankets over her bunk, smoothing them as flat as possible to conceal something underneath with nervous little fluttering movements of her delicate hands.

She seemed to know that someone, or something, was coming towards the wreck and that it was not far away.

When she was satisfied that she had done her best, she sat down at the makeshift table fashioned out of an empty computer cabinet laid on its

back and gazed through the hatch at the hot dry wilderness. Her head was cocked on one side like a listening bird. Occasionally she glanced fearfully at the bunk, worried that her secret would be found out. Then, as a sudden afterthought, she jumped up and gathered up some of her rock specimens and brought them to the table. Settling down, she started sorting them into different orders as if she were classifying her collection like an expert geologist.

A few minutes later she froze rigid. She had heard the dreaded lurching, scrabbling approach of the hybrid mutation that tyrannised her wretched castaway existence on the desolate arid world of Dido, the Thirteenth Planet.

Koquillion was coming.

The tall hissing figure loomed in the hatchway and manoeuvred itself into the compartment where it towered over her, hideous and threatening.

'You have been outside,' the creature rasped.

Vicki glanced over at the bunk and kept quiet. 'Stand up,' Koquillion commanded.

Vicki obeyed, backing away up the sloping curve of the hull.

'What were you doing out there?'

In sudden panic, Vicki tried to think. 'Walking,' she whispered.

The monster hissed angrily. 'In future you will venture no further than fifty of your metres from the wreck. Is that understood?'

Shaking with terror, Vicki nodded and mouthed 'yes'.

Koquillion turned and scanned the compartment with its bulbous red eyes. Then it stalked towards the bunk, its talons scraping against the hull with piercing shrieks that set Vicki's teeth on edge as she cowered by the radar. She held her breath as the creature reached for the blanket with its lobster claw. Her eyes stared in stark desperation. She gnawed her fist in abject terror.

Then Koquillion swung round. 'You were dragging something from the ruins,' it rasped.

Vicki racked her brain. She nodded. 'Yes... stones... I collect them...'

She edged to the table and picked up one or two of her specimens. ‘They are very beautiful.. She held them out, like an offering to appease an angry god. ‘Your planet is very...’

Koquillion’s claw slashed through the air and sent the stones smashing against the radar equipment. They shattered in a brilliant shower of multicoloured crystals.

Vicki drew back against the bulkhead, as far as she could away from the hissing horror.

Koquillion seemed to hesitate a moment, as if concerned that the delicate equipment might have been damaged. But the monster recovered its composure almost immediately. ‘I am going to talk to Bennett. Remember, you both depend upon me for your very existence.’

As Koquillion turned towards the internal hatch leading through the debris to Bennett’s compartment, Vicki mustered all her meagre courage and stepped forward. ‘I... I heard a noise... up on the ridge...’ Her voice trailed feebly into silence. She took a deep breath. ‘It sounded like an explosion.’

Koquillion whipped round with a ferocious hiss. There was a terrible silence. Vicki hung her head submissively and waited, numb and almost senseless. Then she heard her tormentor speaking as if from a long way off:

‘A spacecraft arrived here.’

‘The *Seeker*?’ Vicki heard herself blurt out in a shrill and hysterical voice. She knew her question was absurd.

‘The occupants were warlike,’ Koquillion told her.

‘They wanted to destroy. They could have destroyed you and pillaged your *Astra Nine*. I could not allow them to survive. I could not have protected them from my kind as I protect you and Bennett.’

‘What did you do to them?’

‘They have been entombed within the mountain. If they are not already dead they will soon perish of hunger and thirst and lack of vital oxygen...’

Koquillion’s words struck a chill into Vicki’s heart.

‘You never gave them a chance,’ she whispered. Then the anger erupted inside her. ‘You could have...’ she spat passionately. Then her voice seized and she hung her head again. ‘I am sorry,’ she murmured. ‘Please forgive me for my outburst.’

Koquillion glowered at her in silence for a moment.

‘You should be grateful to me, you and Bennett!’ he suddenly rasped, his voice like the sound of clashing blades. ‘It is only my intervention that prevents my species from destroying you. Do not forget: I am your *only* protection!’

Vicki knelt before the hideous spectre and clasped her hands together as if in prayer. ‘Yes, I know, Koquillion...

And we *are* grateful. Believe me, we are grateful.’

The monster’s unblinking eyes gloated over her for a moment. Then it turned and manoeuvred itself through the internal hatch and hacked its way through the maze of cables and pipework to reach Bennett’s compartment.

Vicki relaxed a little as she heard it rapping at the shutter. Then she heard Bennett’s voice. ‘No, you cannot come in...’ it snapped in the staccato mechanical tone Bennett often used when she knocked with his food or water and then tried to open the shutter. How like a robot he sounded, she had often thought.

‘It is Koquillion! Open the hatch!’

Vicki heard the customary click and then the grating slide back as the monster thrust the shutter open and closed it savagely. With pounding heart she crept over to the internal hatch and listened. But all she could hear was a faint, blurred buzz of voices and she could make out nothing at all of what was being said.

A muffled groan from the bunk made her jump. She had temporarily forgotten all about her secret during the ordeal with the alien. After a struggle, she finally managed to close the internal hatch partially. Then she ran to the bunk and pulled the blanket aside. Barbara’s lacerated face stared up at her with dazed and frightened eyes. Barbara tried to say something, but Vicki put her hand over Barbara’s mouth.

‘Koquillion saw me helping you,’ she whispered accusingly, as if she were blaming the bewildered stranger.

‘I knew it was stupid to try... I knew he would find out...

Koquillion knows everthing... Everything...’ Overcome with panic, Vicki clutched Barbara’s hand convulsively and bowed her head, tears starting in her big terrified eyes.

Still groggy with shock and the effects of concussion, Barbara neverthless tried to sit up. ‘Who is Cowkwildion?’

she asked in a muddled but loudish voice.

Vicki put her hand back over Barbara’s mouth, trembling with dismay at her outburst. ‘Quiet! He’ll hear you!’

In spite of the consequences of her appalling experience up on the ridge, Barbara quickly sized up the situation and redoubled her efforts to get up from the bunk.

Vicki pushed her back firmly. ‘Do not move. Please stay there,’ she begged. ‘It might return any moment. You have no idea...’

If Barbara had known who the girl was talking about she would have retorted that she had plenty of idea. But she lay back on the pillow and massaged her throbbing temples. ‘All right...’ she murmured weakly. ‘But who are you?’

‘I’m Vicki.’

Barbara tried to smile, but winced with pain instead.

‘Short for Victoria?’ she asked.

Vicki looked blank. ‘Victoria? No, not short for anything. Just Vicki.’ She cast an anxious glance towards the partially closed shutter, then turned back to Barbara, a little calmer. ‘Are you from.. You are not from the *Seeker*?’

she said hopelessly.

‘The *Seeker*?’

‘The rescue craft.’

Puzzled, Barbara frowned and gingerly touched her scratched and bruised face. ‘Rescue craft? No, Vicki, I am from the... My name is Barbara,’ she said kindly, managing a sort of smile.

Vicki seemed reassured. She wiped away her tears and returned Barbara's smile as she sat herself on the edge of the bunk.

Barbara was now feeling much more alert, despite her hammering headache. 'Tell me about this... this Koquillion,' she said.

Vicki glanced at the shutter. 'It... He just keeps us here.'

'Us?'

'Bennett and me. There's a rescue craft on its way here.

But Koquillion does not know about that!' Vicki added hastily. 'But he will find out eventually, I know he will. He always does.'

Barbara pushed herself into a semi-sitting position and put out a comforting hand. 'Why does Koquillion keep you here?'

Vicki tried to pull herself together. 'They killed all our personnel, except for Bennett and me... When we crashlanded here we made contact with them... One night they invited us to a sort of council meeting... I had a fever or something and I stayed here in the wreckage... I remember waking up suddenly and thinking it was a thunderstorm but it was... it was an explosion...' Vicki shuddered at the traumatic memory and fell silent for a while overcome with grief. 'But Bennett survived... The only one... He dragged himself back to the wreck... It was days before I recovered and then I found him... Bennett cannot walk. I look after him. We just wait and wait. We have been waiting so long and still no rescue... And I thought you...' Vicki was overwhelmed by silent heartrending sobs.

Barbara sat herself up and put her arms around the girl's heaving shoulders. 'Vicki, I don't understand. If Koquillion's people killed the rest of your crew, why don't they kill you and Bennett? It doesn't make sense.'

Vicki shrugged and shook her head in despair. 'We don't know. We just don't know.'

Barbara bit her lip while she tried to understand what Vicki had been telling her. 'You say you crash-landed here.

Where were you making for?' she inquired gently.

Vicki stood up, the tears now running freely down her pale cheeks. 'My father was taking me to... My father was...'

She crept slowly away from the bunk and leaned her head against the metal panelling of a huge duct which ran the length of the compartment.

Quietly, Barbara swung her legs over and sat up on the edge of the bunk, her concern for Vicki making her forget her injuries and the pain in her head.

Vicki struggled to recover herself. 'Your craft... Is your craft still here?' she asked eventually, turning with a trace of hope in her eyes.

Barbara nodded. 'Yes, yes, I think so,' she said uncertainly.

Vicki took a few faltering steps towards her and then stopped dead as if she had walked into an invisible barrier.

'I remember now, KoquiIlion told me. Perhaps you heard him? They killed the others, Barbara. They killed them.

Your friends up there have been buried alive.'

Barbara uttered a little gasp, as if a veil had suddenly been lifted from her eyes.

'Koquillion...' she breathed, reliving her nightmare encounter outside the tunnel and feeling her injuries again.

Abruptly she realised that if what Vicki said was true, then she too was stranded, a helpless castaway on an alien and inhospitable world.

The Doctor groped around his feet and finally located the torch. 'I don't care for Wagner very much,' he joked, fiddling in the darkness to fix the loosened connection.

'Especially when arias are sung like *that*!' At last he got the thing working again and shone the beam over Ian's shoulder.

Ian remained silent, watching the play of the torch on the sinister tunnel ahead and nervously licking his lips as he waited for the unearthly din to recur, or worse, for whatever had caused it to burst out of the shadows and attack them.

'I just cannot understand it you know,' the Doctor chattered, noticing that the tunnel appeared to broaden out a few metres ahead of them. 'Violence was totally alien to the inhabitants of this planet in the past.'

Ian uttered a grim chuckle. 'People's ideas change, Doctor. I mean,

every new leader...'

The Doctor shook his head, waving the torch to and fro at the same time. 'No, no, no, Chesterton, the Didoi had the best of reasons for avoiding death and destruction. The last time I was here the entire population numbered only a hundred or so.'

Ian's eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'But that's just a handful,' he muttered, thinking that as far as he was concerned just one of the fearsome creatures was quite enough.

The Doctor noddd solemnly. 'Yes, the mere remnant of a once magnificent civilisation,' he sighed regretfully.

Ian stared in disbelief at the word civilisation.

But the Doctor barely noticed him. 'You see, this is a very unusual planet,' he went on. 'It orbits two stars, not just one like the Earth, and to make things even more complicated the two stars are in orbit around each other.'

Ian looked even more incredulous.

'It is known as a rotating binary,' the Doctor continued, warming to his theme. 'But the gravitational effects make the planet's orbit extremely eccentric like a figure-of-eight.

When Dido reaches a certain critical position, the combined heat, light and radiation from its two suns become so intense that the vegetation is burnt up and the seas evaporate. The inhabitants are forced to retreat underground in order to survive.' The Doctor pondered silently for a few minutes. 'The critical period lasts for the equivalent of hundreds of your Earth years. Very few Didoi survive each cycle, I'm afraid.' The Doctor turned to Ian with a wan smile. 'So you see, my boy, peaceful cooperation means everything to them. Without it, they would become extinct.

Ian was about to remark that extinction would be no bad thing, but he decided that it was no use arguing. 'Are you happy to go on, Doctor?' he inquired considerately.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Me? Go on? Don't ask me, Chesterton. *You* were the one who stopped.'

Ian took the torch from him. 'Yes, Doctor, and *you* were the one who dropped the torch!'

Holding the torch out in front of him like a shield, Ian led the way further along the narrow, buckled defile which gradually began to widen out into a vast, black, echoing cave. Ahead of them they became aware of a heavy muffled thumping and dragging sound. Exchanging wary glances, they advanced into the gigantic dark vault and a new sound, even more menacing, sent the hair prickling on the backs of their necks. It was the sound of a massive pair of lungs expanding and collapsing with ominous and relentless power, like a steam hammer in a foundry.

Barbara smiled gratefully as Vicki bandaged her injured hand. The ointment Vicki had applied to her face had soothed the bruises and scratches and she was already feeling much better.

'I should have attended to this straight away instead of behaving so pathetically,' Vicki said shyly. 'I'm ashamed of myself. I don't know what you must think of me.'

'I'm very grateful to you,' Barbara told her sincerely.

'I'm jolly lucky to escape so lightly.' She tried to move her arm, but the shoulder was stiff and swollen. 'It's mainly my arm. I must have wrenched it when I grabbed hold of the tree to break my fall. I hope it isn't dislocated.'

Vicki finished the bandage and got up to put away the medical kit. 'I wonder if Koquillion has gone yet?' she murmured, glancing at the shutter.

Barbara looked round, puzzled. 'Surely we would've seen him.' There appeared to be only two hatches in the compartment.

Vicki pointed to the internal shutter. 'The hull is split wide open through there,' she explained. 'There is a way out through where the intermediate airlocks were.' She gestured at the lash-up of communications equipment and at the makeshift table and bunk. 'After the crash we set up some essential things here because the power cells are in this section. Then, after the... after the explosion I tried to make living space for myself and for Bennett.' Vicki trailed into silence, twisting her hands in anguish.

'Where were the proper living quarters?' Barbara asked as tactfully as she could.

'In the sphere.' Vicki gestured beyond the bulkhead. 'It broke off on impact. Our engineers cut a way out. There was a reactor leak and it's

all contaminated now.'

Barbara stood up slowly and took a few faltering steps to test her legs. 'Well, no broken bones at least,' she smiled.

Vicki said nothing but just stared at the bulkhead which led through the debris to Bennett's compartment as if waiting for Koquillion to emerge.

'What are the others like?' Barbara asked, trying to prompt Vicki to talk about her fears.

'Koquillion is the only one we ever see. They live quite near, I believe, somewhere in the caves. They have to because of their suns or something. It is something to do with the radiation but I don't really know... and the silver things...'

'Silver things?'

Vicki shook her head sharply, as if she did not want to discuss it. 'I have glimpsed them sometimes, just for a second... ' she said reluctantly. 'Like statues. Just for a second.' She crossed to the bulkhead and opened a small panel to put away the medical kit.

Barbara caught sight of a large pistol in the locker. 'Isn't that a gun?' she said, a vague and reckless idea flitting across her mind.

Vicki took it out to show her. 'It's not a weapon,' she explained. 'It fires a signal flare. I keep it ready.'

Barbara recognised it as an extremely sophisticated version of the Very pistol. 'For the rescue craft?'

Vicki nodded and put the pistol back in the locker. 'Our power cells may not last to operate the radio beacon,' she admitted. 'I just hope they find us before it is too late.'

'When are you expecting them to arrive?'

Vicki just shook her head. It was as if her experiences after the crash and the massacre of the crew had numbed her spirit and drained all the fight and energy from her mind and body.

Barbara desperately wanted to help, but she was beginning to realise that she might find herself depending on the rescue craft too. 'Perhaps it will come soon', she said brightly.

Vicki turned on her. ‘But there is always Koquillion!’

she shouted. ‘He could stop us... He could keep us here forever!’ She frowned suspiciously. ‘Why are you staring at me like that?’ she demanded savagely.

Barbara was taken aback. ‘Like what?’

‘You’re sorry for me,’ Vicki spat, advancing as though to attack Barbara. ‘There is no need, do you hear? No need! I am perfectly all right. It does not matter to me whether they come or not. I shall be all right!’

Barbara retreated. At first she was dumbfounded, then she guessed that Vicki’s outburst was a kind of attempt to assert her independence and also a reaction to the bitter disappointment of discovering that Barbara was nothing to do with any rescue mission.

Before Barbara could say anything, Vicki suddenly went as taut as a bowstring. Beyond the bulkhead they heard the sound of laboured movement through the tangled wreckage. Leaping forward, Vicki pushed Barbara down onto the bunk and flung the blankets over her so that she was completely hidden. Then Vicki hastily retrieved some of her scattered rock specimens and sat down with them at the table.

Next moment the shutter panel was thrust fully open and Bennett stumbled into the compartment. He stood staring at Vicki, swaying jerkily on his injured leg. ‘He has gone...’ he said hoarsely, clutching at the radar scanner for support. ‘He tried to trick me into telling him things but I did not Vicki. I did not tell Koquillion about the *Seeker*.’

Vicki nodded and tried to smile approvingly.

Bennett lurched a few paces nearer. ‘Koquillion told me about some strangers up on the ridge... The people in the cave... He killed them all, Vicki... You and I must help each other now... We must cooperate and take care of...’

Vicki jumped to her feet. ‘No, Bennett! Koquillion has not killed all of them!’ she cried.

The blankets were flung aside and Barbara manoeuvred herself upright in the bunk. Bennett swung round and gaped at her as though unable to believe his eyes. Then he uttered a menacing, almost primitive cry. Raising his huge fists in the air, he staggered towards the bunk. Barbara shrank back against the hull, her bruised face blank

with terror.

5

'Do be careful, Chesterton!'

'Be careful, Doctor!' Ian called back. 'It's getting even narrower.' Ian was leading the way along a steadily narrowing ledge which ran high up the side of the huge cavern. Beyond the crumbly edge there yawned the dark abyss, and far below them the torchbeam picked out the jagged boulders and razor sharp pinnacles which pierced the sandy floor. And still the monstrous breathing and burrowing sound echoed all around them, but they could not identify the source. It was as though the mountain itself was a living thing that had swallowed them up; the noises they were hearing were its heartbeat and the working of its mighty lungs.

Suddenly part of the ledge broke away and fell clattering into the darkness. The Doctor lost his footing and started to slip, his fingers scrabbling uselessly at the rock face.

Luckily Ian reached back in time and helped him onto surer ground. They paused for a moment, panting and wiping the sweat from their faces.

'Take it easy now, Doctor,' Ian warned.

'Thank you, my boy.' The Doctor folded away his grubby handkerchief. 'Have you noticed that this ledge is getting narrower at every step?'

Ian grinned bleakly to himself in the shadows.

'Shine the torch at my feet,' commanded the Doctor.

'There you see?'

Ian shone the powerful beam ahead along the ledge and the cavern wall.

'Quite a chasm, is it not?' the Doctor said.

'There's not much to hold onto either, Doctor,' said Ian.

'We'll have to press ourselves against the rock.'

The old man shook his head morosely. 'If I press myself against it any

harder, my dear Chesterton, I shall do myself an injury. Now do get a move on! We cannot afford to stand here admiring the view. We have got to find Barbara, you know.'

Ian threw the Doctor a warning glance and cautiously continued edging his way along the perilous shelf. 'I only hope this leads somewhere useful,' he murmured to himself.

They worked their way slowly sideways for several metres and then reached a section where the ledge was barely wider than the length of their shoes. Not only was it extremely brittle, but in places it sloped away at an alarming angle from the rock wall. If it got any worse they would have no choice but to retreat, but where to? They had followed the only viable route out of the chamber where the TARDIS had materialised and it had brought them onto this ledge. They had not found any alternative way down to the cavern floor.

Pressed flat against the wall, they were just negotiating a particularly nasty sloping section when the titanic bellowing noise suddenly erupted again. Ian stopped dead and the Doctor, only centimetres away, collided with him for a second time, almost knocking him down into the abyss. Ian's fumbling fingers nearly dropped the torch, but at the last moment he managed to trap it between his knees. At the same instant, the Doctor lost his balance and started toppling forwards. With superb reflex action Ian grabbed his sleeve and dragged him back against the rock face. Wringing with cold sweat, they stood rigid against the wall listening to the dying echo of the awesome roar.

'You must be more careful,' the Doctor scolded. 'You almost dropped the torch.'

'What the devil was that?' Ian whispered.

'Well, it certainly wasn't *me*!' snapped the Doctor, angry with himself for almost causing a disaster. 'Stop showing off and shine the torch down there.'

Clenching his teeth in frustration, Ian extricated the torch from between his knees and directed its broad, brilliant beam over the precipice.

What he and the Doctor saw in the bright pool of light made their flesh creep. The sandy floor of the cavern appeared to have come alive and to have formed itself into a huge beast of terrifying size and menace. Its vast head was the size of a small room and it tossed savagely from side to side as if trying to tear the stale air apart.

The enormous jaws were armed not with teeth but with curving scimitar gums as sharp as blades. On each side of the head was a giant luminous red eye whose dilated pupil enabled the beast to see quite easily in its dark habitat.

Around the thick neck there was a kind of ruff of bony spines alternating with weblike plates. The creature's massive body was plated and hinged like that of an armadillo or a rhinoceros, and its dry horny skin, pitted and grooved, was the colour of the sand itself. The monster's thick legs were so short that its belly dragged perpetually along the ground and its long tail thrashed the sand like a whip.

The Doctor and Ian stood transfixed on the ledge above, watching the behemoth as it caught their scent and reared up on its hind legs. It uttered another deafening raucous bellow and its hot foul breath made them turn aside in disgust, their gorges rising.

'What's that nightmare thing?' Ian whispered, trying to press himself into the rock out of harm's way.

The Doctor shook his head grimly. 'I have no idea, my boy. My only concern is that it is down there and we are up here...' The Doctor emitted a squawk of alarm as a portion of the ledge gave way beneath him.

Ian grabbed his companion's sleeve and managed to drag him to safety a little further along the ledge. The monster's baleful eyes glowed like red-hot rings just a few metres below them and its huge purple tongue lashed greedily out of its cavernous mouth.

'Thank you,' muttered the Doctor grudgingly. 'But we really cannot dawdle along gawping at the local fauna, Chesterton. This is not a zoo. Come on!'

Ian Chesterton could quite happily have pitched his infuriating companion into the monster's gaping jaws, but he controlled his irritation with heroic forbearance and watched as the creature slumped back on all fours and dragged itself off along the cavern floor in the direction they themselves were taking. 'Doctor, that thing's got eyes, so presumably it must have come in from the outside,' he declared, easing cautiously along the perilous shelf again.

'Good. Very intelligent observation my boy,' the Doctor said affably, following close behind him. 'Sort of reasoning I might have employed myself...'

Ian grinned smugly to himself as he edged, like a crab, along the ledge.

'However, I happen to know better,' the Doctor added mischievously. 'You should also have noticed that the beast possesses luminescent irises and can therefore provide its own light source. *Ergo*, it does not necessarily inhabit the open air.'

Ian bit his tongue and fumed in silence, trying to concentrate on his hazardous task.

'However,' the Doctor agreed after a pause, 'it is possible that the beast may lead us out of the caves.'

Ian shone the torch down into the well of darkness. The beast had disappeared round a huge buttress of rock, though they could still hear its thunderous movements and its stentorian breathing. Ian directed the torch along the ledge again. 'It seems to get wider in a minute,' he whispered, anxious not to attract the beast's attention. 'But it slopes a lot more by the pillar and there are hardly any decent hand-holds anywhere.'

'What is that just ahead?' exclaimed the Doctor excitedly, pointing to something glinting in the rock face near the wider part of the ledge.

Ian aimed the torch. 'Looks like a couple of old fashioned doorknockers.' He squinted at the two heavy metallic rings fixed at shoulder height. 'You know, the sort with rings hanging out of lions' mouths. Somebody's obviously been this way before and thoughtfully provided something to hold on to.'

As they drew closer they discovered that the ledge almost disappeared altogether just before the wider section on top of the buttress. Ian found that his toes were overhanging the crumbling edge as he reached forward to grasp the nearer ring.

'Careful, Chesterton!' warned the Doctor. 'Let me have the torch.'

Ian passed the torch back to the Doctor. Then he grasped the first ring with both hands and swung himself forward, his feet barely finding any grip on the tiny strip of ledge. He was about to reach for the second ring with one hand when the creature below uttered another bloodcurdling bellow.

This time the noise was even more unbearable, with an edge to it like the sound of fingernails scraping on galvanised steel. Startled, Ian

lunged at the second ring and overbalanced. As he swung himself forward onto the wider part of the ledge he felt the second ring shift ominously under his weight.

'Watch this one, Doctor. It's loose!' he warned, landing safely on the top of the buttress.

'Loose?' echoed the Doctor, gripping the first ring and preparing to swing himself along to the second one.

'Yes, I'm afraid I dislodged it,' Ian apologised. 'But it's a lot easier over here.'

All at once there was a loud click from deep inside the rock behind the rings followed by the muffled whine of some kind of machinery. The Doctor shone the torch on the loosened ring and peered at the pivot which attached it to the rock. There was a viscous silvery trail running down the wall. 'Lubricant!' he exclaimed. 'The ring has some kind of oil on it, which suggests...'

'And what's that noise?' Ian interrupted. 'I don't like the sound of it.'

'Neither do I , Chesterton. Quick, come back here. It may be some kind of trap.'

Suddenly Ian's heart fluttered and faltered, and a horrible prickling sensation ran up and down his spine. On each side of him, two vertical rows of steel blades had sprung out of narrow slits in the rock wall and locked into position at right angles to the ledge. The blades protruded about thirty centimetres beyond the edge and were pointed at the ends. He was completely trapped on top of the buttress.

'Doctor... I'm stuck!' he gasped, his face a vivid white in the torchlight.

The Doctor tucked the torch under his chin and poised himself with both hands on the first ring. 'Really, Chesterton, why can't you leave things alone?' he muttered in a strangled sort of voice.

Puffing with effort, the Doctor hauled himself across and dug his toes into a tiny cleft in the narrowest part of the ledge to help take some of his weight and enable him to have a hand free to try and reverse the mechanism.

Hanging from the first ring with one hand, he reached across with the other and attempted to force the second ring back into its socket. But

it was jammed solid and would not budge a millimetre.

Below them, the prowling monster let out another gargantuan bellow even shriller and more grating than the last, and its lashing tail sent a salvo of stinging sand flying up into their faces.

'I have a horrible feeling that it's feeding time,' Ian muttered ruefully.

As he spoke the Doctor gave the ring an extra wrench.

There was immediately another series of clicks inside the rock and to their horror the section of wall between the two rows of blades slowly began to move outwards, narrowing the top of the buttress where Ian was trapped with every passing second.

Ian's mouth dropped open and his eyes popped incredulously. 'Doctor, it's pushing me... It's pushing me towards the edge...!' he cried, desperately searching the moving slab for a hand-hold.

Below, the creature sat back on its hindquarters and reared its colossal head again, now uttering short staccato roars of apparent relish and anticipation.

The Doctor yelled to Ian to hang on while he tugged and twisted and pushed the oily ring in a vain struggle to reverse the machinery. Meanwhile the slab of rock trundled inexorably outwards between the blades, and in a few seconds Ian would be compelled to hang over the precipice by his fingertips.

'Doctor, please do something!' Ian begged, his voice cracking with panic.

'You couldn't climb over the bars onto the other side?'

the struggling Doctor suggested doubtfully.

'Doctor, they're razor sharp!'

The Doctor peered more closely. 'Dear me, so they are.

How very inconvenient for you. Well, it's no good trying to climb over them.'

Ian jerked his head towards the rings. 'Can't you do anything with those?' he pleaded, as he felt his heels reach the edge of the ledge.

His fingers found a small crevice in the slab and he managed to work

them into the hand-hold just as his feet were shoved off the ledge into thin air. 'Doctor, I can't hold on much longer...' he gasped, his body sagging and his arms stretching painfully under the weight.

'I am doing my best,' the Doctor assured him, experimenting with manipulating both rings at the same time while still hanging on to one of them. 'Kindly remember, Chesterton, that it was *you* who triggered this fiendish mechanism.' With the torch jammed under his chin, the Doctor was forced to perform the most ape-like contortions in order to shine the beam onto the rings above his head. If Ian had not been trapped in such a perilous predicament, he would have been helpless with laughter.

About fifteen centimetres beyond the edge, the section of wall abruptly stopped moving and Ian was stranded in mid-air above the yawning abyss. Below him the monster continued its hungry bellowing. Unluckily the two bladed barriers stuck out further than the movable slab, so Ian could not even attempt to swing himself round the edge of the slab and back onto the narrow ledge beside the Doctor.

Ian's fingers were growing number every second. He tried to call out but his dry throat would only emit a croak of despair.

'Use my coat!' the Doctor suddenly shouted. Wriggling out of it, he hooked his arm through one of the rings and leaned out as far as he dared to fling his frock coat over the pointed ends of the blades. 'The material's pretty thick. It should protect your hands long enough for you to swing round here onto the ledge.'

Blinking the sweat from his eyes, Ian squinted sceptically at the coat draped over the murderous blades.

He had no sensation left in his hands now but he could feel the monster's hot rancid breath on his legs as it reared in the darkness beneath him. It seemed that he had nothing to lose. 'This'll never work...' he gasped, grabbing at the coat with one hand.

The Doctor grasped the other side of the coat with his free hand and held it firm. 'Now, my boy, swing!' he commanded.

Ian nearly fell. As he tightened his grip on the coat sleeve the cramped fingers of his other hand tore away the brittle crevice in the mobile slab and his body lurched sickeningly against the blades. But the coat material protected him and he ended up hanging with both hands clutching the musty old garment.

‘Pull yourself up and round this way!’

Valiantly, Ian hauled himself hand over hand up the Doctor’s coat and round the end of the blades. The Doctor seized his arm and Ian jumped for the narrow ledge with a leap worthy of a swashbuckling hero. His flailing toes found the thin ledge and he landed breathless and soaked in sweat next to the panting old man. The Doctor moved back to the first ring, leaving Ian clinging weakly to the troublesome second ring.

‘Thanks, Doctor... Thought I’d had it...’ Ian whispered, trying to avoid the temptation to look down into the bellowing abyss. When he had recovered a little he peered at the rings and then at the blades and the moving section of wall.

‘It looks like something out of Edgar Allan Poe,’ he muttered, trembling at the thought of what he had just escaped.

‘Poe? Who’s he?’

‘But what is it for, Doctor?’

‘No idea,’ the Doctor snapped, removing the torch from under his chin and shining it onto the rings.

There was a long, low rumble from the creature and they heard it dragging itself laboriously away beyond the buttress.

‘The executioner sounds disappointed,’ Ian murmured wryly.

The Doctor grunted, studying the rings through narrowed eyes, his head thrown back and his cheeks sucked in with characteristic concentration. ‘Come along, come along. Give me a hand!’ he ordered abruptly.

‘Barbara could be in grave danger. We have wasted quite enough time as it is.’

‘What shall I do?’ Ian asked, trying to balance on the thin ledge without putting any strain on the ring.

‘Nothing, until I tell you to. Unless I am very much mistaken these rings work in conjunction with one another. It is just a question of working them in the correct sequence,’ the Doctor explained mysteriously. He twisted and turned the first ring like a burglar trying to open a combination lock, pressing his ear against the rock and

listening for something. ‘Half a turn clockwise now!’ he cried.

Ian obeyed as best he could without losing his footing.

Nothing seemed to happen.

The Doctor frowned and turned his ring again. ‘Two turns anticlockwise now!’ he commanded.

Ian accomplished the difficult manoeuvre without slipping.

‘And push!’

Ian pushed. The ring eased a little way into its socket.

‘Half a turn anticlockwise again!’

Ian obeyed.

‘And push!’

Ian pushed again. There was a hollow clang inside the rock followed by a grating whirr.

The Doctor grinned in the torchlight. ‘Just a matter of diagonal thinking, Chesterton...’ His grin faded when nothing else happened. ‘Let go of the ring!’ he suddenly shouted.

Ian gaped at him in disbelief. ‘But I’ll fall if I let go.’

The Doctor shook his head tetchily. ‘Not if you just let go for a second,’ he snapped. ‘That’s all I need.’

Steeling himself, Ian released his hands for as long as he dared and then grabbed hold of the ring again. At the same time the Doctor made some delicate adjustments to the first ring as if he were working a complicated key into a lock. The second ring suddenly snapped back into its socket with a bang, almost jerking Ian off the ledge. With a muffled whirring noise the blades and the slab of rock between them slowly retracted against the cavern wall.

‘My coat!’ yelled the Doctor as the nearer row of blades vanished into its niche.

Ian flung out his and and just caught the frock coat as it was pushed off the end of the top blade by the edges of the thin slot housing it.

‘Don’t jerk the ring!’ warned the Doctor as Ian pulled himself back against the wall.

Ian passed the Doctor his coat and pressed himself thankfully against the rock. ‘Well done, Doctor! Let’s hope there aren’t any more nasty little surprises like this in store for us.’

‘The sleeve is torn,’ complained the Doctor, handing Ian the torch and struggling into his trusty garment. ‘What a shame. I’ve hardly worn it.’

Ian smiled to himself and shone the torch ahead. ‘If we use the slots for the blades as hand-holds we should be able to pull ourselves onto the buttress without jerking this confounded ring,’ he suggested. ‘So, come on, Doctor. And don’t touch anything!’

Below them the huge beast dragged itself along the cavern floor frequently stopping to rear up and sniff at the narrow ledge running along the rock wall. Beyond the buttress the ledge angled slightly downwards so that each time the creature stopped, its gnashing jaws chopped at the dank air closer and closer to the hazardous shelf along which Ian and the Doctor were gingerly making their way in search of the cavern entrance.

Soon the prey would be within easy reach!

6

Barbara knelt beside Bennett’s motionless body which lay where it had fallen, half-way between the hatchway and the bunk. Vicki hovered anxiously nearby.

‘Is he dead?’ Vicki asked in a quavering voice, wringing her hands.

Barbara finished checking Bennett’s pulse and laid her palm on his brow. ‘No, he’s alive,’ she replied eventually.

‘It must have been the effort of walking that made him collapse like that.’

‘If he does not recover...’ Vicki began. She bit her lip and gazed intently at Bennett’s pallid features.

Barbara loosened the round collar of his tight-fitting tunic. ‘Look, he’s coming round,’ she murmured as Bennett’s eyelids flickered. ‘How do you feel?’ she asked gently as the big man opened his eyes.

Bennett stared blankly up at her and his head lolled wearily from side to side.

'This is Barbara...' Vicki said, leaning tentatively over him.

Bennett nodded feebly. 'Koquillion told me about your arrival,' he told Barbara. 'He killed your companions.'

Barbara's lips trembled but she managed to keep herself detached from the awful possibility. 'I'm sure... I'm sure they have survived somehow,' she said, smiling bravely.

All at once Bennett raised a hand and pulled Barbara's head down closer to his own. 'Koquillion never makes mistakes,' he rapped in a surprisingly alert tone.

Barbara freed herself and shrugged. 'Well, he made a mistake about me, didn't he!' she retorted, with a glance at Vicki's frightened face. 'I don't think he's so infallible.

Next time the ugly brute shows up I think we ought to surprise him. He doesn't know I'm here, so why don't we set a trap of some kind and overpower him?'

Vicki's face suddenly lit up with reborn determination and she clutched Bennett's shoulder. 'Bennett, that's a wonderful idea isn't it!' she cried. 'The three of us should be able to do *something* to avenge all those cold-blooded murders.'

Bennett's pockmarked features creased with contempt.

'No, it damn well is *not* a wonderful idea!' he shouted.

'Revenge is a barbaric affair. We humans should have no truck with anything so despicable.'

Barbara was shocked to see how instantly Vicki's spirit was broken and how easily she was cowed. She rounded on Bennett. 'It's worth a try,' she insisted. 'What have you both got to lose anyway? You won't be any the worse off if it fails.'

Bennett struggled into a sitting position. 'Won't we!' he scoffed. 'There is a rescue craft on its way, or has the stupid girl not told you that?' He glared fiercely at the cowering Vicki. 'We sit here quietly and do as Koquillion tells us and then perhaps we get a chance to escape... Go back to Earth or at least somewhere we can live decently.'

Vicki considered this for a moment and her chin jutted out defiantly. ‘But we could still go!’ she blurted out.

Bennett laughed cruelly. ‘You are a child. You have no knowledge of these things.’

‘Just a minute...’ Barbara interrupted.

But Bennett forged relentlessly on. ‘If we do dispose of Koquillion we gain nothing at all. And if things go wrong then he will kill us.’

Vicki’s frail body slumped in defeat. ‘Yes, yes, Bennett is right, Barbara.’

‘Of course I am right!’ Bennett shouted boorishly. ‘Just because I am injured and forced to lie on that bunk all the time you must not assume that I’ve lost the use of my brain!’

Barbara nodded and gave him a faint smile.

Bennett softened a little. ‘Would you be kind enough to assist me back to my quarters?’ he asked in a calmer voice.

The two girls helped him to his feet. It was no easy task manoeuvering the big man through the hatch and across the fantastic muddle of wreckage between the compartments. When they reached the hatch to Bennett’s quarters, he eased himself free.

‘You will obey Koquillion?’ he asked them earnestly.

‘You do realise what is at stake?’

Barbara nodded.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘I’ll help you to your bunk,’ Barbara offered.

‘No need. I can manage,’ Bennett insisted.

Barbara stepped forward to help him through the narrow opening.

The big man rounded on her savagely. ‘ *I said I can manage!* ’ he snarled, almost hurling her aside.

Barbara shied away, staring in confusion.

Bennett quickly pulled himself together. Sweeping the lank black hair off his face, he smiled at her apologetically.

'Thank you, but I shall be fine,' he assured her quietly, moving inside and sliding the shutter closed.

Vicki touched Barbara's arm diffidently. 'It is getting late. I must go out and collect the water,' she confided meekly. 'It grows dark very suddenly here on Dido. Would you be kind and set out the things for our meal, Barbara?'

Barbara's face brightened immediately. 'I'm *starving*,'

she confessed.

Vicki smiled. 'We only have emergency rations,' she warned. 'Open a sachet and add water.'

Barbara wrinkled her nose and shrugged. 'Beggars can't be choosers, Vicki. It sounds just like home. Show me where everything is.'

Along the base of the cliffs at some distance from the wreck of *Astra Nine* there was a huge shallow crater in the sand and scree. Under the cliff, just below the lip of the crater, a thin trickle of discoloured water issued out of the rock close to the mouth of a low tunnel. In fact, the water ran out of a broken-off pipe, buckled sections of which could be seen sticking up at intervals out of the sand between the crater and the ruined terraces nearby.

The pipe had obviously once provided the water supply to the former community from some source up in the range of mountains. All around the broken stump of pipe, a profusion of glossy-leaved shrubs and small trees not found elsewhere on the arid plains grew in the waterlogged sand among the rocks and boulders. Many of the bushes were torn and splintered and stripped of their lush foliage as if some large creature had feasted off them regularly. The muddy sand was trampled and beaten and bore the countless prints of large three-toed feet.

In the low evening light, Vicki's long shadow stretched across the crater as she walked around the edge to the broken pipe. She carried a pair of plastic containers suspended from her shoulder by a cord. Humming to herself, she watched the warm murky liquid cut its short dark trail in the sand before being quickly swallowed up into the insatiable desert. A few giant flying beetles were foraging around in the mud and Vicki gazed dreamily at the brilliant colours encrusting

their hard shells like precious stones as she positioned the first container under the jagged end of the pipe.

She frowned as she noticed that the noise of the water running into the bottle sounded feebler than usual. ‘The supply must be drying up...’ she murmured to herself, acutely aware of how vital that faltering trickle was to the survival of herself and of Bennett, and now perhaps of Barbara too. She glanced up into the dull coppery sky.

Dido’s one currently visible sun now hung low close to the horizon, and the scattered solitary thorns and cacti raised their arms to the heavens in perpetual despair, like refugees in the distance.

It took ages for the container to fill and Vicki started daydreaming as she knelt in the hot sand. She was totally unaware of the slow, heavy dragging sound coming from the tunnel entrance a short distance away along the base of the cliff

She did not notice the monstrous bulk of the sand creature emerging into the open and advancing through the scrub and thorns towards the lusher vegetation around the crater. Its huge head tossed and sniffed at the air and its great gaping jaws opened and sliced shut again with relentless purpose as it loomed up behind the innocent figure kneeling in the sand.

Barbara soon completed the simple task of laying out the items for their coming meal. She was so famished that even the prospect of soup and a kind of reconstituted meatloaf held all the promise of a magnificent banquet.

She browsed around among Vicki’s rock and crystal specimens for a while, but quickly grew more and more impatient and even more conscious of her rumbling stomach. She went over to the exterior hatch and looked outside. There was no sign of Vicki. The evening felt suddenly much cooler so she stepped out of the hull and wandered about for a few minutes to enjoy the relief of fresher air. In awed astonishment she stared at the massive sphere and the giant cylinders belonging to the other sections of the wreck, amazed at the sheer size of the crashed spacecraft.

She was just about to walk along to take a closer look at the spherical assembly, when she suddenly caught sight of Vicki dawdling along the rim of the crater with the heavy water containers slung over her shoulder. She waved to her, signalling that she would come and help, but Vicki appeared not to have seen her and stopped to pick up an

unusual rock she had noticed.

The next moment, the giant lumbering shape of the sand creature rose up the slope of the crater behind Vicki and bore down on her like a bulldozer. Barbara tried to yell a warning, but her dry throat produced nothing but a rasping croak.

Then she remembered the Very pistol. She rushed into the hull and took the gun from the locker. With trembling fingers she loaded several of the big cartridges into the chamber and dashed back outside. In the distance she could see Vicki standing facing the advancing monster as if rooted to the spot. The hideous creature had lowered its head as if preparing to charge and trample its paralysed victim underfoot.

'Vicki! Get down! Get down!' Barbara screamed, aiming the pistol at the monster's bellowing mouth.

Vicki spun round to face her. 'No, Barbara! No... No...

No!' she yelled, waving her arms frantically.

But Barbara could not distinguish Vicki's words amidst the creature's strident bellowing. Steadying the gun with both hands, she squeezed the trigger button. The gun recoiled with a whiperack and a second later the monster's head was engulfed in a gigantic incandescent fireball. The explosion threw Vicki onto her back and its ferocious white heat immediately turned the surrounding foliage into a roaring inferno. Barbara watched in horror. The creature's death throes took several minutes, its colossal bulk thrashing and writhing and its lashing tail narrowly missing Vicki as it cracked rocks in two and carved great scars out of the sand.

Vicki got slowly to her feet and gazed at the enormous smouldering toffee-like blob that had been the creature's head. Then she picked up the water bottles and set off towards the wreck.

Barbara stared at the modest-looking object in her hand, stunned by the effect it had produced. No Very pistol that she had heard of could have done anything remotely like it.

Having successfully negotiated the buttress, the Doctor and Ian had gradually worked their way warily down the sloping, crumbling ledge towards the floor of the cavern, poised to react instantly should the hungry monster attack.

But for some time now they had neither heard nor seen any sign of the creature. It had completely vanished.

‘Doctor, I think I can see daylight!’ Ian pointed to a faint smudge of light ahead of them.

About twenty metres from the point where the ledge finally descended to the cave floor, it suddenly broadened out and they were able to twist round and walk normally down the slope instead of having to move sideways with their backs against the wall.

Suddenly the Doctor stopped. ‘Chesterton, give me the torch!’ Ian handed it over and the Doctor shone the beam over a strange grooved panel in the rock shaped like a door.

Thoughtfully he ran his fingers over the worn ornamentation carved in the rectangular panel, muttering to himself as though he recognised it. ‘This might well lead somewhere,’ he declared eventually.

Ian peered at the weird hieroglyphic characters which resembled writing on an Egyptian frieze and shrugged.

‘Most doors do, Doctor. Come on, I think we’re nearly there.’

The Doctor lingered, testing the flush edges of the panel with his fingernail. There was no kind of handle or lock.

Then he shook his head decisively. ‘Might take quite some time to open it. No, Chesterton, in my opinion we should try the obvious way first.’ He set off again, glancing back over his shoulder at the mysterious portal. ‘But keep a sharp look-out, just in case somebody or something tries to creep up behind us!’

Soon they felt the warmish dry air on their faces as they approached the low overgrown and boulder-strewn entrance to the tunnel.

‘I was right!’ crowed the Doctor, forging ahead eagerly.

‘We have reached the surface..

His triumphant words were drowned by a sharp bang followed by a huge dull explosion which lit up the mouth of the tunnel with a macabre greenish-white glare.

The Doctor threw himself backwards and collided with Ian so that they both fell in a struggling heap in the sand.

Then they froze as a terrible harsh screeching noise erupted outside.

‘What is that?’ Ian whispered.

‘It sounded like some sort of gun.’

‘No, I mean that horrible shrieking.’

They lay there listening to the agonised howls.

‘I think it must be the end for our arenicolous friend,’

the Doctor said quietly.

Ian scrambled to his feet and started dragging the Doctor after him. ‘Come on, Doctor, Barbara could be in danger!’ he urged.

They emerged from the tunnel, blinking in the fading light, and stared in horrified revulsion at the huge melted and charred head writhing among the boulders.

‘I’m not sorry to see the end of that thing,’ Ian said, coughing from the acrid smoke curling off the creature’s rubbery flesh.

The Doctor suddenly looked rather sad. ‘Actually the poor beast was quite harmless,’ he murmured. ‘I had forgotten the silicodon, a species found only on Dido and a planet called Sokol in one of the Willoughby galaxies.’

‘No sign of Barbara anywhere,’ Ian said anxiously, craning up at the ridge towering above them.

Something caught the Doctor’s eye. ‘Look!’ he cried, indicating a small figure struggling towards the wreck.

‘That’s not Barbara.’

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘No, it is not.’ He turned to Ian.

‘Then who is it? Come on Chesterton!’

They set off at a cracking pace in pursuit.

Vicki flung down the water bottles and fixed Barbara with a look of utter hatred. For a few seconds she was speechless.

Barbara stood near the hatch, completely nonplussed by Vicki’s reaction to her quick thinking. ‘Vicki, you’ve had an awful shock...’ she began.

‘You killed Sandy!’ Vicki screamed at her. ‘Why?

Whatever made you do such a terrible thing?’

Barbara hesitated, baffled by the girl’s extraordinary question. ‘But Vicki... the thing was almost on top of you!’

‘How *could* you!’ blazed Vicki, tears running down her dirty face. ‘Sandy only wanted some food.’

‘But it was going to attack you.’

‘Sandy only eats... only *ate* plants and insects. I trained him to come here for food.’

Barbara spread her hands helplessly. ‘But, Vicki, I couldn’t have known that could I? I thought you were in terrible danger.’

Vicki picked up the containers and shoved past Barbara into the hull. ‘I shouted... I shouted to you, but you did not listen,’ Vicki accused.

Barbara followed her inside. ‘Vicki, all I could see was those awful jaws, and it was making such a horrible noise I just ran for this thing and fired.’

Vicki flung the containers onto the makeshift table and rounded on Barbara, her eyes livid with anger and hurt.

‘He was my *only* friend and you *killed* him!’ she sobbed, collapsing onto a duct casing.

Barbara looked at the Very pistol she was holding and then at the broken figure of Vicki, utterly at a loss what to do. Then a sudden movement outside made her spin round with a gasp of fright. She levelled the pistol at the hatchway and watched the two long thin shadows approaching across the sand outside. Another sharp movement behind her caused her to swing round again to see that Vicki had stood up and was pointing at the open hatch in panic. Before Barbara had time to turn back to the entrance, she heard footsteps on the metal edge of the hatchway.

'I think you have already used up that cartridge, my dear!' cried a familiar voice.

'Barbara!' cried another familiar voice.

Scarcely daring to believe her ears, Barbara slowly turned. 'Doctor... Ian... I thought you were both dead!' she burst out, her voice wavering with gratitude and relief.

The Doctor shook his head wearily. 'People are always trying to kill me off,' he complained, smiling and easing the gun out of Barbara's hand. 'But I never felt better in my life, my dear.'

He glanced over her shoulder at Vicki's tearstained face and his keen eyes lit up with interest. 'And who do we have here?'

The still, dead air in the labyrinth of caverns was disturbed by a harsh grating sound. The rectangular panel, which the Doctor had just been examining in the rock face above the ledge, swung slowly open on juddering hinges. There was a dry scratching noise and then the tall bristling figure of Koquillion emerged onto the ledge hissing and rustling its antennae in the gloom like some gigantic nightmare grasshopper. Its globular red eyes burned at the end of their stalks as it stared along the ledge in the direction of the low tunnel leading outside.

A dull opalescent light played over the ledge from some source beyond the mysterious doorway, and in the layer of dust and sand on the rocky shelf it illuminated a distinct heel print from the Doctor's boot. Koquillion bent forward to examine the print and noticed a vague trail of two sets of footprints leading towards the tunnel. The creature's breath hissed with pent-up menace as it traced the outline of the print with its scimitar claw. Straightening up, Koquillion turned and prodded a sequence of points on the embossed surface of the panel. With a click and a grating shudder the panel ponderously

swung shut flush against the rock face. Koquillion stalked off along the ledge following the footprints with awkward birdlike strides.

After a while the panel in the rock wall grated open a second time. Two tall, slim figures appeared on the ledge and slowly stared around themselves before closing the panel by the same method as Koquillion. The figures had long heads tapering to narrow jaws set on slender necks.

Their features, if they had any, were mere pale smudges in the darkness — flat and smooth with faintly sparkling flecks on the skin. Only their eyes showed clearly as large greenish gleams, almost perfectly circular.

Their lithe bodies were encased in tightly fitting single-piece suits made of a mirror-bright silver material which incorporated supple boots and a kind of balaclava headgear. From the shoulders hung short multilayered mantles made of the same material. The beings made no sound at all. Even their breathing, if indeed they did breathe, was inaudible. They turned to one another in a kind of graceful slow-motion and seemed to communicate without speech.

Then they strode off along the ledge, their wiry bodies relaxed but alert, gliding towards the cavern entrance like silver wraiths bent on some secret purpose...

7

Night had almost fallen. In the wreck of *Astra Nine* the power cells were still producing just enough energy to provide reasonable illumination in the hull compartment.

Outside, the air was already growing chilly, but inside the wreck it still felt hot and stuffy. The Doctor was sitting on the duct casing with Vicki, while Barbara and Ian hovered tactfully in the background.

The Doctor had been trying to comfort Vicki, chatting gently away like a favourite uncle. ‘So you see, my dear child, in a few hundred Earth years’ time there will be no night at all on this planet because Dido will be positioned exactly midway between its two suns... Here, take this and blow your nose.’ He handed Vicki his rather grubby handkerchief. ‘And give that pretty face of yours a wipe too. If you will excuse me saying so, you do look rather a mess at the moment!’

Vicki hesitated. Then she took the handkerchief, cleaned her grimy face and blew her nose. She managed a wan but grateful smile. ‘Is that

better?'

The Doctor glanced round at Ian and Barbara, preening himself with his success. 'Much better.'

Ian took another sip of brownish water from a mug and brandished the signal flare pistol he had been examining.

'Cheer up and stop worrying,' he cried heartily. 'If this Koquillion chap shows his ugly face here again we'll make a mess of it for him!'

But Vicki's smile vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. 'You must not talk like that,' she gasped. 'I keep trying to explain why Bennett and I have to obey Koquillion. He has protected us against the others all this time...'

The Doctor fixed Vicki with his cold, piercing gaze. 'My dear child, have you *seen* any of the others?' he asked sharply.

Vicki hesitated again, almost as if she were tempted to conceal something from them. She shook her head firmly.

'No I have not and I hope I never will.' All at once she sprang up and faced them like an animal at bay. 'You will spoil it! I know you will. You will spoil everything!' she shouted, pointing accusingly at Ian who was still brandishing the gun.

The Doctor rose and took Vicki's hands in his. 'It's all right, Vicki, we would not wish to jeopardise your safety,'

he assured her quietly. 'I promise you that we shall not interfere with the rescue. But I should like to have a chat with your Mr Bennett because I think I may be able to help you both. Would you be kind enough to take me to him?'

Vicki's suspicious gaze darted from one to the other.

She seemed to have regained a streak of steely defiance.

She shook her head vehemently. 'The rescue craft is on the way. It will arrive soon. It is going to take us back to Earth.

Don't you people understand?'

Barbara stepped forward. 'Now, listen, Vicki, you've been here a long time,' she began in her straightforward classroom manner, 'and I don't think you're facing up to what Koquillion might...'

Vicki thrust her face into Barbara's with unexpected ferocity, her eyes blazing with resentment. 'Yes, that is true. I have been here a long time,' she shouted, her lip curling. 'I know what has been going on. But you people just walk in here and assume that you are going to take control. But we don't need you! You will only ruin everything.'

Vicki darted up to the Doctor and then to Ian, her frail body taut with belligerent independence. 'It was all right here before you arrived, it really was. And the *Seeker* is coming. Nobody invited you here! Nobody!' Shaking with anger, she turned her back on them and leaned over the radar installation.

The Doctor glanced gravely at Barbara and Ian and silently motioned them out of the compartment. His two companions looked at one another rather reluctantly. The arid dust outside did not exactly look inviting. However, they nodded meekly and quietly went out through the hatchway into the night, taking care to keep close together.

The Doctor cleared his throat and joined Vicki at the radar scanner. 'Most interesting... An X-ray scanning system and a very advanced version too,' he remarked, genuinely surprised, and anxious to avoid broaching the subject of their recent argument. 'The prototype systems used ordinary X-rays and were far too hazardous for general application. However these accelerated axion systems can be most satisfactory. Perhaps Mr Bennett might allow me to take a little look at it later?'

Vicki kept her back to him and said nothing.

The Doctor chose his words with the utmost care.

'Vicki, I listened to what you said and I understand the way you feel; but I suspect that you didn't really mean all that about us wanting to take control, did you?'

There was a brief pause and Vicki bit her lip and shook her head.

The Doctor sat down agan. 'Please come and sit down, Vicki. We mean you no harm. We want to help if we can.'

Vicki turned. 'Bennett says that when we reach Earth we must explain what they did to us here. He wants this planet obliterated. He says that Koquillion must not be allowed to escape punishment for what he did.'

The Doctor sighed, his face etched with perplexity and concern. 'Well,

I agree with Bennett about Koquillion at least,' he replied earnestly. It was clear that he was deeply troubled and puzzled by the inexplicable change in the behaviour of the planet's inhabitants since his previous visit. 'But as you are aware, I know a thing or two about Dido so don't you think there is a chance that I might be able to help Mr Bennett deal with the situation a little more effectively?'

Vicki gazed at the Doctor, her face calmer and her eyes disconcertingly direct and searching. The old man was impressed by her cautious dignity. she gave a slight smile and nodded.

The Doctor beamed. 'Splendid.' He stood up briskly.

'Now, let me talk to Mr Bennett and let's see if we can sort something out. I promise I shall listen to what he has to say.'

Vicki offered him her hand. 'Come along, I'll take you to him.'

The Doctor clasped her thin hand between his own with a warm smile of reassurance and Vicki led him through the interior hatchway. The Doctor took a close interest in the complicated tangles of debris cluttering the intermediate compartment, muttering mysteriously to himself as he identified various items of equipment which lay twisted and scattered around them.

'Thank you, Vicki, I can manage now...' he said, releasing her hand, 'Why don't you pop out and keep an eye on Barbara and Ian for me? I don't want them wandering off and getting themselves into hot water.'

At first Vicki grinned, fascinated by the Doctor's quaint manner and his odd expressions. Then her face darkened.

'Barbara...' she did not finish her sentence.

The Doctor frowned and wagged his finger. 'Now, now, Vicki. You're not giving poor Barbara much of a chance,'

he scolded.

'She killed Sandy.'

The Doctor grimaced and nodded. 'If I were Barbara I should have done the same. She had no idea that the poor beast was harmless.'

Vicki shook her head adamantly. 'No, you have not the sort of face that... that kills...'

‘And Barbara has?’

Vicki remained silent.

‘Barbara believed that you were in danger, Vicki. After all, Sandy was not a very benevolent-looking pet, was he?’

Vicki tried to resist the Doctor’s gentle but persuasive argument. ‘No, I suppose not,’ she was forced to admit eventually.

The Doctor put his hands on her shoulders. ‘Believe me, Sandy had a much quicker and more merciful death than the one which awaited him through starvation and cruel thirst,’ he said quietly. ‘Please try to understand what Barbara did and why. Will you try and do that?’ he asked gently. ‘For me?’

Vicki thought for a moment, biting her lip at the painful memory of Sandy’s death. But at last she smiled and nodded. ‘Very well.’

‘Thank you,’ the Doctor murmured, pushing her gently but firmly through the hatch. Then he turned and clambered through the maze of wreckage towards the shutter leading to Bennett’s compartment.

He found it slightly open. ‘Mr Bennett?’ he called.

There was no answer.

Gripping the edge of the panel, the Doctor threw all his weight against it. The panel slid a few more millimetres aside and then jammed fast.

‘You cannot come in!’ rapped a nasal, almost metallic voice.

The Doctor pondered a moment, trying to assess what kind of man he was going to have to deal with. ‘I just want to have a word with you,’ he said casually.

There was another silence.

Setting his jaw with determination, the Doctor again heaved at the shutter for all he was worth. It refused to budge, but he thought he detected a clicking noise from the other side.

‘I said you cannot come in!’ rasped the strange voice with menacing emphasis.

‘I regret that you oblige me to resort to physical force...’

declared the Doctor distastefully. He listened again, and since there was no further reaction from within, he looked around for something to use as a crowbar. His sharp eyes lit upon a length of stout metal rod protruding from one of the smashed airlock mechanisms. Working it free, he inserted it between the edge of the panel and the bulkhead and started to try and lever the shutter open.

8

In the angry red twilight Barbara and Ian had been exploring the awesome sprawling wreck of the *Astra Nine*.

Ian had been trying to find a way to clamber up into the escape hole cut into the bottom of the vast spherical assembly, but Barbara warned him about the radioactive contamination that Vicki had mentioned earlier. Then they had wandered down to the gigantic rear section of clustered cylinders and again Ian had tried to discover some way, of gaining access to the huge silent structure.

'I wonder what the ship was carrying,' Ian said, giving up and setting off towards one of the detached cylinders sticking up at an angle out of the sand.

Barbara followed him rather reluctantly, telling him what little she had gleaned from her conversation with Vicki. She watched as the intrepid science teacher pushed his way into a kind of huge funnel through layers of gauze-like metal foil.

'I think this is some sort of filtering device...' Ian called, vanishing behind the flimsy metal curtains.

A sudden noise up on the ruined terraces made Barbara look round with a startled exclamation. In one of the gaping black portals she thought she caught a glimpse of two silver figures standing motionless staring out across the pains. Then they were gone.

'What's the matter, Barbara?' Ian cried, emerging from the funnel structure.

She pointed up at the ruins. 'I saw something up there,'

she said vaguely.

'What?'

'I don't really know, Ian. They looked like two... two figures in

spacesuits... They were all silvery.'

Ian stared along the deserted terraces.

'They weren't like that Koquillion thing,' Barbara went on, taking Ian's arm and trying to pinpoint the exact spot.

Ian shrugged. 'Well, there's nothing there now.' Barbara shivered. The air had grown surprisingly chilly after the long hot day.

'Perhaps they were some of the crew,' Ian suddenly suggested. 'Maybe some of Vicki's people survived after all!'

Barbara clutched his arm uneasily. 'No. They weren't like... I don't think they were *people*...' she said in a hushed voice.

'Oh come on, you're imagining things, Barbara Wright,'

Ian laughed. 'You're as bad as that awful little Tracey Pollock in 3B!'

'Tracey Pollock...' Barbara murmured. Coal Hill School suddenly seemed a million miles away. In fact it was a great deal further and long since buried beneath the Metropolitan Disposal Plant.

All at once Vicki appeared silhouetted in the hatchway in the distance. 'Barbara... Ian... Oh, there you are!' she called with evident relief. 'I was hoping you wouldn't be far away. It's not safe to venture out after dark. Please come back.'

They all went back inside.

Vicki explained that the doctor had gone to visit Bennett. Then she turned to Barbara, clearly ashamed and embarrassed. 'Barbara, I am really very sorry for what I said before,' she confessed shyly. 'Please forgive me.'

Barbara smiled. ' *You* must forgive *me*, Vicki. I'm very sorry too.'

Vicki nodded. 'Of course you could not have known about Sandy. I over-reacted... I suppose I have grown used to being on my own recently...'

'But you're not alone...' Barbara began.

'Of course you're not,' Ian put in eagerly. 'What about this Bennett or whatever his name is?'

Vicki pulled a face. ‘Bennett and I do not get on,’ she admitted.

Ian grinned sympathetically. ‘I know what you mean.

We felt the same way at first with the Doctor.’

There was a pause. Vicki studied them with renewed interest. ‘You must be from Earth too,’ she said eventually.

They both nodded.

‘How long have you been away?’

Ian and Barbara exchanged wry smiles.

‘Well, we originally left Earth in 1963,’ Barbara replied.

Vicki’s mouth dropped open in amazement. ‘That means you should both be about... about five hundred and fifty years old!’ she exclaimed incredulously.

‘ *What!* ’ Barbara and Ian chorused.

‘Father and I left Earth eight years ago,’ Vicki told them. ‘In 2493.’

Barbara did a rapid bit of metal arithmetic and a look of mock horror crossed her face. ‘Then that makes me about five hundred and fifty five!’ she giggled.

Ian nudged her. ‘Well, Miss Wright, you certainly don’t look your age!’ he confided gallantly.

Barbara wrinkled her nose at him. ‘I try not to think about it too often,’ she admitted with a chuckle.

Ian winked at Vicki. ‘Actually, our ship is rather on the slow side,’ he joked.

Vicki stared at them in utter bewilderment. ‘Stop being so silly,’ she eventually protested. ‘You would have to be pure time-travellers — not just relativistic ones!’

‘We *are* pure time-travellers,’ Ian retorted in mock seriousness. ‘The Doctor’s TARDIS travels through the Space-Time Continuum.’

Vicki screwed up her face and then shook her head in disbelief. ‘That’s impossible!’ she laughed. ‘Scientists gave up that dream two centuries

ago. They certainly couldn't do such an incredible thing in 1963. They knew *nothing* then!'

Barbara's hackles rose and she stood up preparing to defend her civilisation.

What's so special about this old crate then?' Ian demanded, stamping hard on the floor of the hull.

Vicki looked nonplussed. 'Old crate?' she echoed, puzzling over the unfamiliar expression. Then she understood. ' *Astra Nine* is capable of travelling at approximately half the speed of light,' she informed them proudly. 'In our eight year journey we have covered more than thirty-seven trillion, five hundred and forty billion, five hundred million kilometres.'

Ian shrugged. 'The Doctor's TARDIS can do that in no time at all,' he boasted. 'He visited our time on Earth and kidnapped us.'

'The Doctor is from a different planet, a different age, a different universe altogether,' Barbara explained impressively.

Vicki glanced at the internal hatch through which the Doctor had gone to visit Bennett. 'That eccentric old man?' she said sceptically. 'Then where does he come from? And when? And why?'

'And *who*?' Ian muttered wryly, exchanging a helpless glance with Barbara. He shrugged and laughed. 'You know, Barbara, it's amazing how long we've been with the Doctor and yet we know as little about him now as we did when we first met him!'

Barbara gave him a pale smile. Her headache had come back again and all this argument was making her feel faint and exhausted.

Vicki stared at the two strangers, unsure whether she was being sent up or whether they were really attempting to deceive her.

'You're playing games with me,' she eventually accused them. 'I don't believe you at all. The Doctor a time-traveller? It's too silly for words. I don't believe he's even a doctor. He took hardly any notice of Barbara's injuries, you know.'

*

Meanwhile the subject of all this heated discussion had just succeeded in prising open the jammed shutter far enough to squeeze into

Bennett's quarters. The Doctor threw down the metal rod, squared his shoulders and with head proudly erect, strode into the compartment.

To his astonishment it was empty. Bennett was not there. Momentarily disconcerted, the Doctor briefly examined the densely packed complex of equipment which took up most of the cramped compartment's surfaces. By the feeble fluorescent lighting, he searched for a second exit. But there was none. The only means of access was the hatchway through which he had just entered. Yet he had heard a voice ordering him not to come in, so how had Bennett given him the slip? The Doctor studied the edge of the hatchway and found what he was looking for.

'Now, what have we here, I wonder?' he muttered, following a pair of wires crudely fixed around the hatch frame and leading to a locker set into the hull wall nearby.

He slid open the panel and threw back his head, his bright eyes staring down his beak-like nose at the laser disc recorder and circuitry crammed into the tiny space.

Delving into his pockets, he took out a short piece of wire.

'This will do for the shutter in the closed position,' he muttered. Moving to the hatchway, he connected the wire across the two crude terminals embedded in the frame at the ends of the wires leading to the recorder mechanism.

Then he returned to the locker and pressed a series of buttons. 'Recorder primed and ready for playback...' he said with a mischievous grin. Then he went back to the shutter and took the short piece of wire connecting the terminals between his thumb and forefinger. 'Knock knock, who's there?' he chuckled, tugging the wire and breaking the circuit. 'And open Sesame...'

There was a sharp click from the locker. 'You cannot come in!' rasped the metallic voice the Doctor had heard earlier. It issued from a small speaker inside the locker.

Smiling to himself, the Doctor waited patiently for several seconds. 'I said you cannot come in!' the voice repeated, just as it had done before.

'Crude but most ingenious,' the Doctor remarked, returning to the locker and pressing some different buttons.

The tiny speaker hissed slightly and then the Doctor heard Vicki's voice: ' *... of course I like the Doctor,* ' she was saying. ' *He has such a kind face, stern but gentle too. You can sense that he is extremely clever.* '

' *I can see that you're quite taken with the Doctor!* ' Ian's voice put in.

' *Strange, but as soon as he walked in here I knew that I could trust him,* ' Vicki went on. ' *But tell me, why does he wear such peculiar clothes and that long white hair?* '

The Doctor frowned and cocked his head to hear better.

' *We told you, he's from another universe,* ' Barbara's voice said rather indistinctly in the background.

' *Please don't start all that nonsense again!* ' Vicki protested.

' *The Doctor's a genius,* ' Ian butted in again. ' *He can solve any problem... well, almost any problem you care to pose, and he's defeated all kinds of terrible monstrosities...* '

The Doctor switched off the apparatus and shook his head. 'Silly children, silly children,' he chuckled, obviously very touched and flattered. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'Intercom systems... disc recorders...

microphones... How to be in even when you are out,' he mused, turning his attention to the cluttered surfaces of the compartment, his keen eyes darting everywhere in search of something. 'Now, how do you leave the house without using the front door?'

Suddenly he noticed a small square panel under the end of the makeshift bunk. 'Aha!' he cried, kneeling down to examine it. 'Now, assuming that this was originally a wall...' He pressed one of the coloured circles printed on the panel. There was a pause and then a hesitant buzzing and scraping sound behind him. He turned and saw a large section of the hull opening almost under him. 'Unless I am very much mistaken, this is the elusive Mr Bennett's *back* door!' He peered into the dark airlock chamber and shied away as a momentary breeze of trapped hot air wafted into his face. 'Curiouser and curiouser,' he murmured, sniffing the air like a bloodhound picking up a scent. 'And the temptation is quite irresistible!'

Vicki was in the middle of explaining to Barbara and Ian how she came to be marooned on Dido with only Bennett for company.

‘After my mother died my father was offered a place on the *Astra Nine* project. I did not want to leave Earth at first,’ she recalled wistfully, her face unbearably sad. ‘But the Greenhouse Effect…’

‘What’s that?’ Ian asked, eager to gather any information that would be useful to him as science teacher at Coal Hill School – that is, if he ever returned there.

‘Because of the increase in the carbon dioxide content of Earth’s atmosphere, the average world temperature rose and there was a danger that the polar ice would melt…’

Vicki explained.

‘Causing catastrophic floods,’ Ian murmured, nodding thoughtfully.

‘So in the end Father persuaded me to go with him,’

Vicki continued. ‘As I told you, we left Earth in 2493. We were the ninth group of colonists to the planet Astra.’

‘And what caused you to crash here?’ Ian asked.

Vicki looked blank and aimless again. She shrugged and spread her hands. ‘Some of the crew suspected sabotage. I have no idea what happened. All I remember is a horrible, sickening vibration. There was a radiation leak in the main core or something.’ She shuddered. ‘We were thrown off course and captured by Dido’s gravitational field.’

‘How long have you been stranded here?’ Barbara asked gently.

‘It seems like a whole lifetime.’

Ian moved to the interior hatch. ‘Talking of time, the Doctor’s taking rather a lot of it. What’s he doing in there?’

Vicki looked sharply at him. ‘We must not disturb them!’ she snapped.

‘I shan’t disturb them. If they don’t want to be interrupted, they only have to say so,’ Ian replied casually, surprised at Vicki’s outburst.

Ian clambered through the intermediate compartment and knocked on the partly open shutter. ‘Doctor? Mr Bennett? Can I come in a minute?’

There was no reply.

Barbara and Vicki watched through the internal hatchway as Ian tried to force the shutter wider apart.

‘Doctor? Mr Bennett?’ he repeated.

Still there was no response.

A rough grating noise from inside Bennett’s compartment filled Ian with alarm. ‘Doctor? Are you all right in there?’ he shouted, struggling to force his broad shoulders through the narrow gap. He stumbled inside and stared around him in amazement. ‘They’ve disappeared!’

he called, scratching his head. ‘They’ve gone! There’s no sign of them at all.’

He spent several minutes searching the compartment for some clue as to where the Doctor and the mysterious Bennett might be. Baffled, he gave up and clambered back through the intermediate compartment and through the internal hatch. ‘I don’t understand it at all...’ he said to Barbara and Vicki.

But he was talking to himself. Barbara and Vicki had vanished!

9

Crouching low, the Doctor scuttled through the rocks past the huge motionless corpse of the silicodon and across the shallow crater towards the entrance to the low tunnel from which he and Ian had emerged earlier.

Although he had the torch in his pocket, he was grateful for the pale waxy light which Dido’s three visible moons cast over the wasted planet since he was anxious not to give away his presence, at least for the moment.

He stopped among a thick tangle of thorn trees, threw back his head and listened intently to the weird sounds which filled the chill air. They were like the distant but bloodcurdling nocturnal moans of mysterious and unimaginable creatures. Although the Doctor scanned the craggy ridges, the deserted terraces and the surrounding plain, he could see nothing that might be responsible for the nightmarish sounds. Perhaps they came from within the planet itself—a kind of mourning lament for some lost Golden Age, the Doctor mused. He had not revealed all that he knew about the planet Dido to the others, and now he was hoping to discover whether his suspicions about Vicki’s Mr Bennett were justified.

The Doctor ducked inside the dark tunnel and switched on his torch. He shone the beam along the ground and his gimlet eyes soon identified a faint trail of claw imprints leading up the broad beginning of the ledge which he and Ian had heroically followed along the side of the giant cavern.

'I don't think *these* were left behind by any of poor Sandy's relations,' he muttered, kneeling down to inspect the prints more closely. His eyes lit up with particular interest when he also noticed some other vague footprints in addition to the claw prints. 'Peculiar shoes young Chesterton wears,' he murmured, turning his foot on its side and studying the sole of his boot for a moment. Then he examined the scuffed patterns in the layer of sand again and soon identified his own and Ian's prints in the form of a third trail overlapping with the others. 'I wonder who the second lot of prints belongs to?' the Doctor said thoughtfully as he got to his feet. 'Odd that we did not spot the trails before...'

He edged his way cautiously up the sloping ledge which began to narrow as it climbed along the cavern wall. Soon the torch picked out the ornamented panel. Grunting with satisfaction, the Doctor stuck his spectacles on the end of his nose and studied the hieroglyphs, prodding and poking the ancient characters with his finger in different sequences.

'Come along now, open Sesame...' he whispered, his mouth drawing down at the sides and his high forehead creasing with concentration. After several false tries his patience was rewarded with a series of soft clicks inside the rock and the panel slowly swung open, squealing on its dry hinges.

Taking off his spectacles the Doctor paused on the threshold for a moment, letting his eyes accustom themselves to the strange milky light. Then he entered the long, high, barrel-shaped chamber beyond the portal, advancing with slow cautious steps and delving into the deep shadows with his penetrating gaze. He started as the door suddenly swung shut behind him with a shrill squeal which echoed horribly for several seconds in the vast arched vault overhead.

The roof was supported on massive tall columns which splayed out on the top like gigantic mushrooms. From the wide brims of the columns a subdued light radiated upwards bathing the vault with a pale opalescent glow; and from the rings of light, pastel-coloured vapours rose like the scent of exotic flowers, mingling to form a subtle rainbow effect of breathtaking beauty. As the Doctor walked slowly along the

avenue of columns, he noticed that the carved rock surfaces of the chamber were veined with threads of iridescent crystals which reflected the variegated light like strings of countless miniature prisms.

In the centre of the chamber stood a massive, low structure resembling an altar. Octagonal in shape, it was made of huge slabs of polished stone carefully cut so that the angled facets reflected the milky light from above in a tangle of subtle beams. The Doctor walked respectfully round it and then moved into the shadowy spaces behind the columns where awesome carvings, masks and murals depicting ferocious beasts adorned the walls. Between the columns, there were enormous glass cabinets containing ceremonial robes, head-dresses and weapons belonging to some ancient civilisation of great richness and imagination. The whole chamber possessed a dramatic atmosphere of profound solemnity and ritual power.

As the Doctor wandered among the cabinets studying the artefacts on display, he tried to puzzle out what could have been the cause of the sudden change in the once peaceful character of the inhabitants of Dido. Something crunched under his boots. Glancing down he saw that he was walking on broken glass. The front panel of the next cabinet had been shattered and its contents removed. The Doctor switched on the torch and leaned through the huge jagged hole to inspect the mountings for the missing exhibits and the weird hieroglyphics on the indentification tags. Only one word of the ancient Didoi text meant anything to him.

‘ *Khakhuiljan*...’ he whispered, giving the mysterious symbols their nearest equivalents in human speech. ‘Our old friend Koquillion, unless I am very much mistaken.’

Putting on his spectacles again, he fretted over the other symbols for quite some time, but failed to make any sense out of them.

Eventually he gave up and returned to the huge central altar. ‘Many generations of sacrificial victims...’ he mused, running his hand along the worn edges of the polished slabs. Deep in tought, the Doctor sat down in one of the eight throne-like chairs elaborately carved out of the corners of the altar.

He settled himself as if expecting a long wait for someone or something and brooded over his suspicions, occasionally nodding his head with grim misgiving. ‘And I have a nasty feeling that certain ancient rituals have recently been revived..

Ian stepped gingerly out through the external hatch and stood in the eerie light of the three moons. He peered around and listened for some trace of the missing girls.

The night was full of deep colossal shadows cast by the massive structures of the wrecked space craft and the air was filled with the distant unearthly sounds that the Doctor had heard. Listening to the bizarre noises, Ian began to imagine horrible visions of Barbara and Vicki being dragged helplessly away by unspeakable monsters to their mountain lairs. It seemed impossible that they could have vanished without trace in such a short space of time.

Finally he plucked up courage and ventured out into the shadows around the hull. 'Barbara... Vicki... Are you there?' he called. The distant sounds seemed to mock him.

He jumped as something suddenly clanged against the side of one of the huge scorched cylinders forming the space craft's tail section. Slowly he approached the massive structure looming against the sky. It looked as big as a stadium. The thump of his heart against his ribs frightened him almost more than the fantastic shapes silhouetted against the moons.

Reaching one of the detached cylinders whose leaning black bulk rose out of the sand like a windowless tower block disturbed by an earthquake, Ian took a deep breath and felt his way cautiously into the yawning bell of metal at its base. 'Barbara? Vicki? Where are you?' he called. His voice echoed in the cavernous tubes and chambers in the darkness above him like an announcement of doom. He listened for a reply with fading hope, more and more convinced that something dreadful had befallen the two girls. Gradually he became aware of a low hoarse breathing sound somewhere nearby. It made him think of huge leather lungs being worked by some sort of cybernetic mechanism, like a giant robot bellows. Crouching down, he felt around and picked up a stout metal bar. As he straightened up he heard another sharp metallic clang.

This time it seemed to come from one of the other detached cylinders standing some distance away.

Feeling a little more confident armed with the primitive weapon, Ian crept out of the tilted base of the cylinder and ran across the dry rutted ground to the nearest of the other broken-off cylinders a hundred metres or so away. As he edged round the curved skirt of the cylinder he recognised the strange drapery of gauzy foil hanging in

the mouth of the structure. The drapery was twitching and flapping here and there even though there was no longer any breeze to disturb it. Cuffing the clammy sweat out of his eyes, Ian forced his feet to move his trembling body towards the sinister metal drapery. He froze as something scuttled and scraped in the distant shadows beneath the main structure.

He thought he glimpsed a momentary silvery flicker around the cylinder where he had heard the menacing breathing, but if there had been anything there it was no longer visible.

He thought of Prince Hamlet stabbing poor old Polonius behind the arras as he raised the metal bar above his head and prepared to advance on the shimmering chainlink curtain now barely a couple of metres away.

Trying to ignore his drumming heart, Ian took a few hesitant steps. Next moment, something grabbed his wrist, something else jabbed him in the groin and several voices including his own, burst out simultaneously:

‘Got you!’

‘Get away from me!’

‘Look out!’

He was dragged through the rattling drapery and thrown sprawling onto the sand while two invisible figures jumped up and down on top of him in a frenzy.

‘It’s me!’ he yelled.

There was a shocked silence.

‘It’s him! It’s Ian!’ Barbara’s voice shouted.

With everybody talking at once, Ian was hauled to his feet and dragged back into the open. ‘Come on, you two!’

Ian ordered. Quickly taking charge, he seized their hands and ran across the eerie landscape to the welcoming rectangle of light in the side of the hull. They scrambled inside and collapsed on the bunk, the table and the duct all pale and breathless and shaking.

‘We thought… We thought you were the silver things…’

Vicki gasped, smiling with relief.

Ian looked startled. ‘Silver things? What silver things?’

Barbara massaged her injured shoulder which had received another wrench in the tussle with Ian. ‘While you were looking for the Doctor and Bennett... They came through there...’ Barbara pointed to the internal hatchway.

‘Who did?’ Ian interrupted, totally confused.

‘The two figures... They came through the wreckage in there... We tried to warn you but they... We ran out and hid in the big cylinder thing...’ Barbara explained, panting for breath.

‘One of the catalyser filters...’ Vicki added helpfully.

Ian tried to organise his jumbled thoughts. ‘I couldn’t find the Doctor or Mr Bennett next door and when I came back in here you’d both disappeared too, so I looked for you. Then I heard this heavy breathing and I thought it was that Koquillion chap or whatever his name is...’

Barbara stood up, her bruised and grimy face tense with worry. ‘But if the Doctor and Bennett aren’t here, then where are they?’ she murmured, going over to the internal hatch and gazing through the tangled wreckage at the dim light coming from the partly open shutter.

Vicki stood up, her face drawn and frightened.

‘Perhaps... Perhaps Koquillion came...’ she whispered.

Ian shook his head emphatically. ‘Impossible, Vicki. We would’ve heard him or seen him. They would’ve called out.’

Barbara turned to Ian. ‘Surely the Doctor wouldn’t just go away without telling us?’

Ian grinned ruefully. ‘Oh, I wouldn’t put it past the old codger, especially if he’s discovered something interesting.’

Barbara shrugged helplessly. ‘Well, what do you suggest we do?’

‘I think we should remain here,’ Vicki advised earnestly.

‘It is not safe to go outside at night.’

Ian thought for a moment and then stood up decisively.

‘No, I vote we go back to the TARDIS. That’s where the Doctor will make for eventually.’

Barbara glanced at the darkness beyond the external hatch. ‘But what about those silver things and what about Koquillion?’ she reminded them, reluctant to leave the light and the relative security of the *Astra Nine*.

‘I cannot leave here without Bennett,’ Vicki said in a submissive voice.

‘Well, Bennett’s jolly well gone and left without you,’

Ian pointed out cynically.

‘But he can’t walk properly,’ Vicki protested. Her face suddenly hardened. ‘I think that the Doctor has taken him away.’

Ian laughed in her face, frustrated by her objections and still a little frayed at the edges after his unnerving experience outside. ‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ he scoffed. ‘Can you really imagine the little old Doctor lugging a disabled fully-grown man out through a crack in the wall?’

Barbara grimaced at Ian to shut up and put her arm around Vicki’s thin shoulders. ‘Come with us, Vicki. You’ll be much safer than you’d be staying here all alone,’ she said earnestly.

Vicki hesitated, biting her lip in nervous indecision.

She glanced at Ian and he smiled and nodded encouragingly. ‘All right,’ Vicki agreed at last. ‘But I must activate the locator beacon first, otherwise the *Seeker* might not find us.

Ian watched impatiently while Vicki knelt by the communications lashup and switched on the radio signal that would guide the rescue mission to the exact spot. As the equipment came alive the drain on the feeble power cells caused the lights to fade to an even dimmer level. The compartment now looked much less inviting.

‘I hope the power will last,’ Vicki murmured gloomily.

‘If the beacon fails we may be stranded here for ever.’

Impatient to be away, Ian took her by the shoulder.

‘Come along, Vicki. Let’s get back to the TARDIS,’ he insisted.

The Doctor had almost dozed off once or twice despite the hardness of the stone seat. In spite of all the menacing and violent images of the huge masks and the vivid murals looming in the shadows, the vast ceremonial chamber exerted a hypnotic and dreamlike effect, and the Doctor had noticed that the colourful vapours rising into the vault above him were filling the air with a pungent sleepy haze, like incense in a cathedral. He had deliberately seated himself with his back to the entrance but in such a position as to enable him to see the dark doorway reflected in the glass front of one of the display cabinets. He could also see his own reflection, and in the pale overhead light his dark clothes, flowing white locks and severe profile gave him a quite terrifying aspect which made him jump the first time he noticed it! Indeed, he looked like the effigy of an ancient god sitting in judgement.

After what seemed like an eternity, even to the Doctor who was accustomed to insulating his senses from the frustration of passing time, he heard a soft clicking noise behind him. Then the stone panel swung open on its shrieking hinges with a terrifying sound which echoed thunderously around the huge chamber.

After a pause, the Doctor heard an eerie hissing and wheezing sound and then an awkward scratching noise slowly came nearer and nearer. Squinting into the glass front of the cabinet, the Doctor made out a hideous spectral shape lurching up behind him between the pillars.

Koquillion's head seemed to hang suspended in the air while the darker body merged eerily into the deep shadows. The reddish eyes burned like angry gas jets on their thick probing stalks and the beak hissed and flapped behind the gleaming white sabre fangs. The monstrous head nodded menacingly at each squeaking step as the giant curved talons scratched at the polished rock floor; the jerkily clutching claws flashed in the light as the creature swung ponderously from side to side, sniffing out its prey.

The Doctor waited until the thing was almost upon him. Then he rose to his feet, keeping his back to Koquillion. 'Come in, come in. I have been expecting you for some time,' the Doctor declared, his firm authoritative voice echoing impressively around the vault above.

Koquillion stopped in its tracks with a fractured squawk of surprise.

Very slowly the Doctor turned to face the hissing dragon across the burnished stone altar. Like a beast from the underworld, Koquillion loomed through the tangle of coloured shafts of light which reflected

from the polished slabs.

‘This used to be the Didonian Hall of Judgement,’ the Doctor said with a grandly sweeping gesture around him.

‘Their equivalent of a Supreme Court, I suppose.’ The Doctor smiled, his face an almost skull-like mask, hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked under the overhead illumination.

‘Rather appropriate in the circumstances, do you not agree?’

Cautiously the Doctor walked round the altar and stopped in front of the glowering monster. ‘Koquillion, perhaps I should remind you that...’ The Doctor’s voice seized in his throat and he dived sideways just in time to avoid the slashing razor claw as Koquillion lashed viciously at his face.

The beast lurched forward and the Doctor backed away around the altar, keeping his eyes fixed on the hideous apparition. With a deft movement he whipped the torch from his pocket and switched it on, directing the powerful beam straight into Koquillion’s goggling eyes. The creature stopped again, blinded.

Warily the Doctor edged forward again. ‘Perhaps I should remind you that the costume of *Khakhuiljan* was only worn by the most senior Didoi and on the most solemn ceremonial occasions,’ he said in a low calm voice.

‘And, flattered as I am that you should consider my demise to be such an occasion, I do not feel that you are a worthy executioner...’ With a sudden movement the Doctor reached up and grasped the head by one of the sabre fangs.

He gave a sharp tug and the beast’s huge head came away in his hand.

‘Mr Bennett I presume...’ the Doctor said wryly, keeping the torchbeam directed relentlessly into the startled grey eyes which stared at him in disbelief. ‘Allow me to introduce myself... the Doctor!’ He chuckled genially, but then grew solemn as soon as he realised that Bennett did not appreciate the joke.

The Doctor glanced inside the huge hollow head. ‘A most ingenious little voice distorting mechanism, Mr Bennett. I congratulate you. I must admit that your entrance through the chamber was really quite dramatic—

almost unnerving.' He put the heavy mask down on the altar, taking care to keep the torch full in Bennett's eyes while he studied his gaunt, bearded face. 'Well, Mr Bennet, I am intrigued to know the reason behind your elaborate masquerade,' the Doctor continued calmly. 'You see, I happen to know something about the Didoi and their civilisation and what I heard about recent events here made me suspicious.' The Doctor paused, his body alert and poised to react.

Bennett backed off a little, blinking his watering eyes and turning aside. 'Then you might as well know the rest, Doctor,' he replied hoarsely, his voice still sounding a shade artificial even without the miniature device fitted inside the mask. 'I was forced into all this to save my life...'

The Doctor kept his eyes on the vicious talons gleaming at the end of Bennett's huge arms. 'To save your life? But from whom? Not from the Didoi I venture to suggest,' he said acidly. 'There is no more peace-loving species in the entire Universe.'

'From the crew of *Astra Nine*,' Bennett retorted savagely, needled by the old man's scornful tone and by his own helplessness in the glare from the torch. 'I killed a member of the crew. I was arrested and then the craft crashlanded here and I managed to escape. The killing had not yet been notified to Intergalax, so I knew that if I disposed of the rest of the crew I would be safe.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed with contempt. 'Disposed of the crew?' he echoed. 'Of course. How convenient for you to blame their deaths on the innocent inhabitants of Dido.' The Doctor threw back his head and his mouth curved tightly downwards in a grimace of disgust.

Bennett ignored him. 'After we crashlanded here the inhabitants invited the crew to a kind of congress.' Bennett grinned and shook his head at the naïveté of his victims. 'It was so ridiculously easy. I rigged a booby trap using the craft's electrophase condensors. Then...' Bennett crossed two claws as if for good luck, '... just two little wires touched and the whole congress went up. The entire population of the planet and the crew.'

The Doctor's face was impassive and frozen. 'You are insane, Bennett. You massacred an entire population just to save your own skin?'

'I saved the girl,' Bennett snapped. 'Vicki did not know what I had done. She was unaware I had even been arrested. She thinks the crew were killed by the aliens and that I survived. Neat idea, wasn't it!

When we are picked up she will corroborate my story.'

The Doctor nodded gravely. 'And you masqueraded as Koquillion to make her feel threatened by the planet's terrible inhabitants.'

Bennett laughed. 'She came to rely on me to protect her from Koquillion, so I kept control over her.'

The Doctor shook his head, sickened by the warped logic of Bennett's story. 'And if your plan had succeeded you would have been safe,' he sighed. 'Your guilt would have been concealed for ever.'

Bennett stared directly into the Doctor's eyes, no longer affected by the brilliant beam of the torch. ' *If* it succeeded?'

he echoed scornfully. 'But, my dear Doctor, nothing has changed. Except that there are now three more people for Koquillion to dispose of...'

A claw suddenly flashed through the air knocking the torch out of the Doctor's hand and Bennett lurched forward, his cold grey eyes bright with ruthless purpose.

Ironically, he looked even more fearsome now without the huge head: the combination of human head with reptilian body and insect claws suggested some nightmare mutation from the secret laboratory of a demented scientist.

Mesmerised by the slashing talons cutting the air only centimetres from his face, the Doctor backed away, desperately trying to think of a way to defend himself. All at once he felt the edge of the altar in the small of his back.

With a croak of dismay the old man bent backwards over the ancient sacrificial slab, gaping wide-eyed at the loathsome hybrid figure looming over him in preparation for the kill...

10

Behind the blind gaping rectangle of an empty window up on the terraces, Barbara, Ian and Vicki had watched the nightmare figure of Koquillion crossing the shallow crater and entering the tunnel leading to the entrance to the Hall of Judgement. By the weird light of the three moons and against the fantastic wasted landscape the monster had looked like something out of a dream.

‘Well, we certainly can’t risk going through that way,’

Ian declared.

Barbara grinned weakly. ‘I’m so glad you said that. I don’t think I could face another confrontation with Mr Koquillion.’

Vicki shuddered. ‘Nor I.’

Ian looked worried. He had forgotten all about the terrifying obstacle course of narrow ledges, gates made of knives and the fiendish booby trap of moving walls which lay between them and the safe haven of the police box. Nor was he entirely convinced that the sand monsters —if there were any more of them—were quite so harmless as Vicki and the Doctor had claimed.

‘Not only that,’ he murmured, ‘the Doctor and I came out that way and there’s an awful cave with a ledge only six inches wide high up along the wall. I’m not sure I could face it again, especially with you two in tow.’

Barbara bristled indignantly. ‘What do you mean, *us two in tow*?’ she demanded, nudging Vicki for moral support.

‘Just you wait, Ian Chesterton. We girls aren’t so useless as you boys like to think!’

Ian was about to describe the knives and the moving slab but then decided not to mention them, just in case they were forced to take that route after all. ‘Come on, you two, we’ve got to look for another way through to the TARDIS,’ he said with artificial eagerness to boost morale.

He turned to Vicki, who had hardly said a word since they had left the wreck. ‘Vicki, you don’t know of any other ways into the mountain, do you?’

Vicki shook her head. ‘Bennett told me never to stray far from the *Astra Nine*. He said Koquillion’s people would most likely kill me.’

Ian exchanged bleak glances with Barbara. ‘Any suggestions?’ he asked gloomily. ‘I don’t suppose there’s any chance we could break into the tunnel up on the ridge, Barbara, the one Koquillion blasted to bits?’

Just then Vicki’s body tightened like a drumskin.

‘Look...’ she whispered, staring across the crater towards the huge dark bulk of the silicodon’s corpse.

They saw the two tall silver figures striding gracefully into view over the lip of the crater. The figures stopped and turned to one another. Then they turned and seemed to stare at the tunnel mouth. Finally, they set off round the edge of the crater towards the tunnel with long loping steps.

There was an awed silence.

‘What the dickens are they?’ Ian gasped eventually.

‘Those are the silver things that came into the wreck while you were looking for the Doctor and Bennett,’

Barbara gabbled in her haste to explain. ‘Don’t you remember? I caught a glipse of one when we were outside while the Doctor was having his little talk with Vicki.’

Ian stared open-mouthed at the shimmering creatures.

‘But what *are* they?’ he asked Vicki.

But Vicki seemed to have withdrawn even more into herself, like a child trying to make something nasty disappear simply by refusing to look at it. She seized their arms. ‘We must get away. They will kill us!’ she said.

But Ian and Barbara were so fascinated by the ghostly figures that they resisted Vicki’s efforts to persuade them to flee. Suddenly, without warning, Vicki broke away and ran off into the depths of the ruin.

‘Where is she going?’ Ian muttered, hurrying after her.

‘Vicki, come back here! Vicki!’

Barbara waited by the gaping hole in the stone wall, watching the strange figures pause by the entrance to the tunnel into which Koquillion had disappeared. She felt her skin creep as the figures stared around and seemed to look straight at her with their luminous green eyes, though she was fairly sure they could not see her in the shadows. She sighed with relief when at last they turned and vanished into the base of the cliff. She listened for some sign of Ian and Vicki returning, but the musty ruin was deathly quiet.

‘Ian... Are you there?’ she called, straining to see into the dusty blackness.

There was no reply.

Stretching out her hands in front of her, Barbara inched her way into the void with hammering heart and trembling limbs. The walls of the ruin felt powdery and her searching hands sent a fine choking dust into the air which stuck to her bone dry throat. She stumbled blindly through echoing empty chambers deeper and deeper into the mountain, croaking Ian’s name over and over again. Eventually she heard muffled voices in the distance. It was hard to make out what they were saying.

‘Try to reach up...’ Ian seemed to be telling Vicki.

‘But I can’t move...’

‘Try to press your feet against the sides and use your back to lever yourself up...’

Then there was a terrible scream.

‘What’s happened? Where are you?’ Barbara shouted, trying to orientate herself and decide which direction to take.

Again there was no reply.

With mounting panic Barbara pressed on. Gradually her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness and she discovered that there was a very faint glow from veins of some kind of fluorescent mineral in the rock which gave a faint light and enabled her to see just a little without being able to distinguish much detail. As far as she could tell, the chambers were circular and connected by short tunnels some of which were blocked by stone shutters. Several of the chambers seemed to have collapsed and were blocked by fallen rock, and treacherous cracks and chasms lay like deliberate traps along the way. Frequently she stopped and called out, torn between wanting to be heard by her friends and avoiding giving herself away to whatever monstrous horror might be lurking in wait in the darkness. But there came no reassuring answering shouts, nor even any cries for help or of warning. Ian and Vicki seemed to have disappeared without trace.

Eventually Barbara found herself standing on a kind of wide ramp sloping sharply downwards. She hesitated, unsure whether to venture on down the ramp or whether to turn round and gamble on being able

to retrace her route to the terrace and then try another route altogether.

Something stirred in the darkness above and for a moment Barbara thought it was Ian and Vicki. She turned and was about to call out to them when something about the noise froze her jaw. She pressed herself back into the alcove leading to the last chamber she had passed through and listened. The slow dragging movements were repeated in short regular bursts, as if a heavy weight were being dragged down the slope. Barbara's voice was a frozen lump in her throat. She forced herself backwards into the chamber.

But before she reached it she heard a sudden grating sliding noise and her back came up against a solid barrier of stone as a shutter droped down sealing off her escape.

Quaking with terror, she listened to the dry rasping approach of the invisible horror as it advanced relentlessly down the ramp towards her, rustling and crackling like the branches of a gigantic desiccated tree.

Ian's spine was racked with painful spasms as he worked his way down the slightly funnel-shaped shaft bracing his feet and back against its almost vertical sides. He could hear Vicki's pitiful moans rising out of the darkness below him and he scarcely dared imagine what he would find when he finally reached her.

He bitterly reproached himself for failing to catch her in time to save her from falling into the hole gaping in the ramp. He had not even considered the problem of how they were to get out of the shaft again. Suddenly the shaft narrowed until he could barely squash himself into it with his bent knees up against one side and his back against the other. Something soft touched his hand and he uttered a yelp of fright.

'It's all right. It's me!' said Vicki's muffled voice from underneath him. 'I'm completely stuck.'

'Are you hurt?'

'No... just a little dazed and rather shaken.'

Ian wiped the sweat out of his eyes, though the air was quite cold and he shivered.

'There's a hole in the bottom here,' Vicki reported.

Ian did his best to raise his body a few centimetres to give her a little more room. ‘A sort of drainage thing perhaps,’ he suggested, wondering how on earth they were going to climb out.

‘And there are some bones.’

Ian swallowed the layer of sand and dust coating his parched throat. ‘Bones? What sort of bones?’ he croaked.

There was a brief rattling noise beneath him.

‘Animal bones... or human bones.’

Ian thought for a moment. ‘How big is the hole?’ he asked, an idea of loathsome horror occurring to him.

‘About forty centimetres across.’

Ian forced a cheerful laugh. ‘Oh good, no danger of slipping through then.’

‘The edge keeps crumbling away, Ian.’

There was a pause.

‘You mean the hole’s getting bigger?’

‘Perhaps this is some kind of trap,’ Vicki murmured faintly.

Ian felt around him. ‘Or a burrow,’ he said grimly.

‘A burrow? What for?’

‘I’m not stopping to find out!’ Ian tested the brittle sandstone sides of the funnel. ‘Can you reach your arms around my waist, Vicki?’

Vicki tried. ‘Yes, just about.’

‘Right. Then hold on tight and try to use your knees to help...’ Ian told her, starting to manoeuvre himself back up the conical shaft.

Vicki’s additional weight was crippling, but they made slow progress despite the constant crumbling of the shaft walls. At last after a hard struggle they managed to reach the wider section of the funnel and paused to rest a moment.

‘What about Barbara?’ Vicki panted.

‘I just hope she’s had the sense to stay put,’ Ian gasped, trying to massage his numb knee and ankle joints.

‘This is all my fault, Ian. I shouldn’t have panicked,’

Vicki confessed in an embarrassed voice.

‘We all panic sometimes,’ Ian said gallantly, though inside he was feeling frightened and angry.

The next section was much more difficult. Ian had to stretch his body almost horizontally across the chasm and lever himself upwards with his hands behind his back and his feet flat against the opposite side, gradually straightening his legs as the funnel widened out.

Vicki clasped her arms around his waist and did her best to ease the strain by using her own feet as best she could, but the weight on Ian’s back and legs was almost unbearable. Several times he lost his grip and they slipped back a little way down the treacherous shaft.

Eventually, after an agonising struggle, they reached the top. Ian was just able to span the gaping hole without his body buckling in half and sending them slithering to the bottom again. He told Vicki to pull herself along his legs until she could grab the edge of the hole by his feet and drag herself up onto the ramp. At last she managed to clamber out of the hole and she hurried round to kneel behind Ian’s head. Reaching down, she slipped her hands under his arms.

‘Whatever you do don’t let go!’ he warned, gripping her hands with the insides of his arms. ‘Now pull!’ While Vicki supported his body, Ian swung his legs down and dug his heels into the side of the shaft. With a furious back-pedalling movement he manoeuvred himself up onto the ramp. Vicki gave him a grateful hug and they sat side by side on the edge of the hole breathlessly marvelling at their amazing good luck.

Seconds later a piercing scream brought them scrambling to their feet.

‘Barbara!’ Ian gasped. He grabbed Vicki’s hand and led the way up the ramp in the direction of the anguished cry.

Suddenly Vicki stopped. ‘What is that noise?’ she whispered.

They listened. Something huge was approaching along the ramp, dragging itself in short spasmodic heaves. Ian put his hand over Vicki’s mouth and pulled her into a deep recess in the rock. They

waited in silence, hardly daring to breathe. The massive thing came closer and closer and soon they could hear a sort of shrill snuffling sound. In the faint light from the veins of luminous rock, they saw a glistening spherical head looming towards them, tiny red eyes burning on either side of the slimy featureless ball.

Behind the head, a thick segmented body looped and curled and slid itself forward by bunching up and then expanding its elongated armoured rings. The gigantic worm was at least fifteen metres long.

'What is it?' Vicki eventually whispered once the monster had passed.

'Some kind of arthropod I suppose,' Ian replied, watching as the huge head suddenly disappeared into the ground. 'And I think we've just been trespassing on its front doorstep.'

Vicki shuddered. 'You mean we...' It was too horrible to even think about.

'Yes, Vicki. We've had a miraculous escape. I think that thing lives down the hole.'

'But surely it couldn't fit,' Vicki objected.

Ian thought a moment. 'Perhaps when it emerges it leaves a lot of debris behind like a sort of plug,' he suggested vaguely.

They listed to the sound of furious burrowing from the hole.

'That might explain the bones,' Vicki murmured.

'Bones?'

'As you said, when it comes out of the hole it probably brings up... well, debris.'

Ian put his arm round Vicki's shoulder as much to comfort himself as to reassure her. 'Not a very hospitable planet to land on!' he murmured wryly. 'What with that thing and Sandy and Koquillion and silver robots. Come on, let's go and find...'

'Barbara!' they chorused, turning to each other in dismay. In the horrifying encounter with the giant armoured worm they had temporarily forgotten all about the scream and their missing companion.

Barbara crouched in the alcove, pressed against the immovable shutter

that had trapped her on the ramp. She was still shaking with terror and nausea after her close encounter with the hideous worm. She had been so scared that she had scarcely been able to bring herself to look as it slithered past her cramped refuge. It was a long time before she could bear to open her eyes and convince herself that it really had gone.

Very slowly she ventured out of the alcove and listened to the monster's receding movements. When they had ceased altogether she thought she heard distant voices echoing faintly in the tunnel from the same direction. It took all her willpower to resist the temptation to call out Ian and Vicki's names. As she crept tentatively down the slope she felt the sticky trail of the giant worm clutching at the soles of her shoes with a sound like spitting fat in a pan and it was all she could do to stop herself retching in disgust.

She paused again, listening for the ghostly voices. But there was nothing but menacing silence all around her.

Growing a little bolder, Barbara continued on down the ramp. She began to wonder what kind of function it might have had in the Didonian settlement which seemed to stretch right into the heart of the mountain.

A sudden scuffling behind her made her quicken her pace. The scuffling seemed to come closer and closer and she broke into a run, heedless of the hazardous darkness. A cry of panic burst from her lips as she put a foot into yawning empty space and found herself toppling forward.

At the same instant, both her arms were seized and she was yanked backwards so that she fell flat on her back screaming hysterically. Pale faces loomed over her.

'Barbara! It's all right! It's only us!' Ian's voice hissed gently over her as friendly hands helped her to her feet again. 'You nearly fell into the hole!'

11

A split second before Bennett's murderous talons slashed into his throat the Doctor glimpsed the sonic laser device hanging at the side of the cumbersome Koquillion attire.

Grabbing it from its magnetic clasp, the Doctor flung the heavy instrument into his attacker's face.

Bennett screamed with pain as the ring of hard crystal lenses cut into his flesh. Staggering back, he crashed into a display cabinet which cracked open like an egg showering him with fragments of glassy material. The Doctor dived forward to seize the sonic laser which had skidded across the polished stone floor under one of the neighbouring cabinets.

But he was not quite fast enough. Wrenching off the awkward talons, Bennett freed his hands and beat the Doctor to it. He raised the lethal device and aimed it at the Doctor at pointblank range, fiddling frenziedly with the small control buttons on its handle.

'You haven't a chance,' Bennett gasped, wiping the blood out of his eyes. 'This thing can pulverise your insides faster than a microwave beam.'

The Doctor racked his brain for some desperate evasive move while Bennett tried to activate the laser device which seemed to have been damaged by the Doctor's throw.

'You'll just end up as a squashy skin bag full of jelly...'

Bennett laughed, managing to switch on the primer circuit with his big clumsy fingers.

Suddenly the Doctor remembered something. Fishing frantically in the voluminous cluttered pockets of his frock coat he unearthed a small brass-mounted concave mirror, a relic from an antique microscope he had once tried to restore. As Bennett pressed the trigger button the Doctor held up the mirror and directed it at the device. The air whined with a stream of high-pitched rapid pulses and a thin beam of bluish light shot out of each of the crystal lenses arranged around the disc at the end of the barrel of the mechanism. The Doctor's thick mirror reflected the beams back again, focusing them into a single intense spot at the centre of the disc.

The Doctor struggled to stand his ground and steady the mirror as it violently throbbed and vibrated in his hands, almost forcing him over onto his back. With a shrill splitting sound the laser machine shook itself to pieces in Bennett's numbed fingers, clattering to the floor in a shower of disintegrating components. Dumb-founded, Bennett stared at his empty tingling hands and at the fragments of his super-weapon scattered around him.

The Doctor grinned and flourished the hot mirror triumphantly. 'I always think wet shaving is so much less hazardous, Mr Bennett!' he

quipped, blowing on his scorched fingers.

Bennett simply stared at him incredulously, shaking his head in silence as if he were in the presence of a legendary magician.

'Like vampires, people who fire laser guns shouldn't look in mirrors,' the Doctor chuckled, pocketing the lucky talisman.

Slowly Bennett pulled himself together. Without taking his cold grey eyes off the Doctor for one second, he struggled out of the heavy Koquillion outfit and extracted his feet from the huge talons which had encumbered his movements so disastrously. Then he advanced on the Doctor, his thin lips frothing like the mouth of a crazed dog.

The Doctor quickly realised that in spite of his slight injury from the crashlanding of *Astra Nine*, Bennett was far more agile than he had pretended to be for the purpose of deceiving Vicki. As Bennett raised his huge hairy hands in a strangling gesture, the Doctor ran back around the altar looking anxiously for some means of escape or self defence.

Suddenly Bennett changed direction and almost caught the old man as he abruptly reversed his retreat and fled round the other way.

Bennett smiled contemptuously. 'You may as well give up old man,' he jeered. 'Why not make it all much easier for both of us? Stay where you are and let me finish off this unpleasant little business with the minimum of fuss.'

Just then the Doctor caught sight of the torch lying where it had been kicked in the previous scuffle against the base of the altar. Playing for time, he gave a conciliatory smile. 'Mr Bennett, do you spell your name with one "t" or two?' he inquired calmly.

'What possible significance could that have for you?'

The Doctor shrugged and edged very slowly round towards the torch. 'Oh, I just wondered whether you were related to the great Bennet, the cosmological engineer,' he said casually trying to hook the torch towards him with his toe. 'You *have* heard of the Bennet Oscillator of course?'

Bennett hesitated, uncertain how to react to this.

'No? Oh well, perhaps it hasn't been invented yet,' the Doctor said, dragging the torch nearer. 'A beautifully simple but highly effective

device.'

'You are quite mad!' Bennett breathed, starting to advance slowly round the altar.

The Doctor jack-knifed at the waist, picked up the torch and straightened up again. Switching on the torch, he was relieved to find that it was still functioning. He flashed the powerful beam into Bennett's eyes.

'It works!' he cried. 'Or rather it will when it has been invented, on the principle of photon inertia using a small array of multiply vectored lasers,' he babbled on, backing away towards the huge pillars leading to the entrance. 'I do hope I'm not blinding you with science, Mr Bennett?'

Bennett shouted out in frustration, shielding his eyes from the brutal glare as he tried to pursue the retreating figure of the Doctor.

'I refuse to believe that there is not at least *some* good in everybody,' the Doctor continued, talking nineteen to the dozen. 'So who knows? Perhaps one of your distant descendents will give the world the Bennet Oscillator. Let us hope so.'

'I have no children!' Bennett spat with savage scorn. 'It would be madness to bring new life onto a doomed and poisoned Earth. I am not prepared to do it!'

The Doctor felt his way around the first pillar. 'Most alturistic of you. But you *are* prepared to take life away, it seems.'

Bennett kicked the bulky Koquillion garb out of his way and the talons skidded across the floor squealing and hissing against the glazed slabs. 'What do you know about me?' he snapped between hard white teeth.

'You are a self-confessed murderer. You have even succeeded in misusing a peaceful tool developed by Didonian technologists as a weapon!' the Doctor retorted as Bennett's boots crunched over the remains of the sonic laser.

'I killed in self-defence,' Bennett protested.

'On which occasion?' the Doctor demanded sardonically, backing towards the next pillar nearer the entrance.

Bennett stopped. 'On the mission... Eight years cooped up with

McQuade... He was high...

Deoxyphenylsulphonates... I caught him trying to alter the navigation programme... But I was too late... We were forced to divert here to Dido... It was McQuade...' Bennett clenched his huge hands and his big body shook with rage.

The Doctor paused, puzzled. 'Then if you were acting in defence of the *Astra Nine* and its personnel, why should you want to conceal McQuade's death by even more killings? It seems a curious method of defending people.

They perished anyway.'

Bennett rushed at the Doctor. 'I don't have to justify myself to you, you senile old fool!' he snarled savagely.

Taken by surprise, the Dpctor attempted to turn and flee but he was cornered against the pillar. He struck out at Bennett's crazed face with the torch, but next moment Bennett's powerful hands closed around his throat. 'Then why bother?' he gasped, his grip on the torch loosening and his arms lolling at his sides as Bennett's grip tightened.

'The others got in my way, just like you...' Bennett growled, his eyes goggling with hysterical passion. 'Why do people always have to interfere?'

The Doctor wanted to reply that he had often asked himself exactly the same question, but he was unable to speak or even gasp, so tight was Bennett's crushing grip around his windpipe. His knees buckled and he slowly slid down the pillar, his face fixed in a purplish mask of mute desperation as he stared pop-eyed at his assailant. Bennett's face was frozen in a trancelike spasm of raw hatred as he squeezed the breath out of the feebly twitching busybody.

Gradually the Doctor's body went limp and hung in Bennett's hands like a bundle of old clothes in a jumble sale.

Bennett gazed blankly at his victim for a moment. Then his eyes filled with uncertainty and fear. His hands slackened around the Doctor's throat and he half-turned his head as he heard strange soft sounds behind him. With a hollow moan, the Doctor slumped onto his side at the base of the pillar and lay deathly still and silent. Bennett swung on his heel with a startled cry and then he began to back away, shaking his head and making odd little gibbering noises as he gaped in horror at something standing on the altar. 'No... no... no... You are all dead...

I killed you all... You are all dead... !' he suddenly shrieked.

The tall silver figures had appeared on the altar as if from nowhere, like gods. Their lithe frames, more than two metres in height, shimmered in the shafts of coloured light reflected from the altar slabs. Their emerald eyes stared expressionlessly in Bennett's direction, but seemed to look right through him as if he did not exist. Their suits reflected the surroundings like mirrors and Bennett gazed at his own awestruck and terrified face frozen in the dazzling sheen of the material. It was as though the things had stolen his image, even his very identity, and left him an empty shell.

Bennett glanced at the entrance. It was still closed and he had not heard the ear-splitting shriek of its hinges.

'How did you... get in here?' he stammered, breaking out in an icy sweat.

He tried to distinguish their features, but as always the things seemed to have none, the brightness of their silver suits somehow making their faces fade into insignificance except for the circular eyes which gave nothing away. 'Why don't you ever answer?' Bennett yelled, beating his fists together in frustration.

The figures continued to stare through him, silent and absolutely motionless.

Bennet was unnerved by their silence and he began to panic. 'I could help you...' he offered, in a pathetically submissive voice, taking a few hesitant steps towards the altar. 'Your civilisation is in ruins. I could work for you.

We could restore all the magnificence...'

Bennett's voice cracked into silence as the two figures suddenly moved forward and stepped down onto the floor, their slender limbs suggestive of enormous strength and suppleness.

Sweating and trembling, Bennett continued to gibber and gesticulate helplessly as he backed away from the inexorably advancing figures. Suddenly they separated, and by moving swiftly in opposite directions round the altar, trapped him in front of one of the thrones which formed the corners of the octagonal structure. Terrified out of his wits, the big man clambered up onto the stone seat still mouthing meaningless words and phrases at the silent relentless beings. Then he stepped up onto the central slab and moved slowly into the centre, as

if he was steeling himself to make a break for it across the altar and up the length of the huge chamber to the stone door.

One of the figures put its silver gloved hand onto the arm of the throne. There was a sharp crack, like the sound of a whip-lash, and the top of the altar snapped open like a huge black mouth. Bennett was suspended for a moment in mid air, like a character stepping off a cliff in a cartoon film. 'I killed you all... I killed you *all*...' he croaked.

Then he vanished into the void, the sickening thump of his body against the sides of the shaft echoing time and time again, until at last it was swallowed up in darkness and silence.

With another whiplash crack the altar snapped shut.

The two silver figures turned abruptly and strode back to the pillar where the Doctor lay motionless and pale as chalk. Their eyes brilliant in the subdued light, the figures stooped over him and stretched out their jerkily clasping hands.

The Doctor's eyes flickered open for a moment and he stared dully at the two blurred things which kept merging and separating crazily in the air above him.

His mouth opened as if he was about to speak. Then it sagged shut and his eyes closed again, as though for the last time.

12

The *Seeker* Mission was in serious trouble. In the navigation module First Deputy Weinberger and Trainee Oliphant sat shoulder to shoulder at the console trying to work out what was wrong.

'It cannot be the mach inertia system or the laser gyros,'

Oliphant reported, sitting back in his padded seat and rubbing his tired bloodshot eyes. 'They all check good.'

Weinberger nodded up at the incredibly detailed galactic neighbourhood chart shimmering on the wide curved screen above their heads. 'Beats me, son. There is no apparent malfunction anywhere, but we are fifty per cent further away from Dido than we should be and we were tracking thirteen microarcs off true course before we corrected.' The big American brushed his bristling crewcut and chewed his gum morosely. 'I surely would love to know what we encountered back there.'

Oliphant shrugged and tapped the miniature hologram plate beside him on the console. ‘Freak reception perhaps.’

Weinberger stared at him and then emitted a snort of derision. ‘A ghost?’

‘It has been known to happen.’

Weinberger chewed impatiently, waiting for his latest systems check to report on one of the monitors. ‘You’ll be talking about collisions with flying pigs next,’ he growled.

Oliphant leaned over and touched some keys on the hologram board. ‘Thank you!’ he exclaimed brightly. ‘You have solved the next clue. It is *porcine*.’

Weinberger scowled blankly at the young trainee.

‘Porcine?’

‘Pigs... To do with... Flying or otherwise... Porcine.’

Weinberger clenched his big hands. ‘Okay wise guy, just you get back on the radio to those jokers on Dido.’

‘But they are not on communications watch, Mr Weinberger. We advised them to conserve power if you remember.’

Weinberger’s cold eyes lit up dangerously. ‘I said try them!’ he snapped. ‘And keep trying them. We could use a reference fix to confirm what this heap of garbage is telling us.’ He waved his arm at the complex installations surrounding them.

Oliphant stared at his superior. ‘But Mr Weinberger, we have performed the necessary course corrections.’

‘As a result of a close encounter with what exactly, Mr Oliphant?’

The trainee hesitated, suddenly less sure than before.

‘An anomalous monopole field I suppose...’

‘And the blue box?’

There was a long silence. Weinberger’s monitor was still blank.

Then Oliphant sniggered uneasily. ‘You will be speculating about

aliens next.'

Weinberger stopped chewing and leaned forward until his face almost touched Oliphant's. 'Never underestimate the possibility of it,' he warned menacingly. 'Remember, we still have no idea what happened to *Astra Nine*. That's the only reason we have been diverted to Dido.'

Oliphant looked shocked and incredulous.

'Oh yes, don't fool yourself,' Weinberger went on, his voice hardening even more. 'Don't imagine that Intergalax is spending all this money just to pick up a couple of castaways. Our job is to find out exactly what went wrong.

That is all that really matters.' He turned back to his monitor just as it began to show the results of his umpteenth systems check. 'Now, do as I tell you, Oliphant.

See if you can raise *Astra Nine* and get us a fix.'

13

The three trapped humans had made a bold decision. Now that the route back to the ruins was blocked by the stone shutter which had slammed down behind Barbara, they had agreed to forge on into the mountain in the hope of discovering the cavern where the TARDIS had materialised, or at least another route back to the surface.

While they had been holding their whispered conference, a sinister shifting sound had started in the bottom of the funnel behind them. No sooner had they reached their decision, than a hissing and boiling turbulence erupted in the dark chasm and as they turned, the glistening spherical head with its tiny gleaming red eyes burst out of the hole and reared up, its lurid pink mouth yawning hungrily in their faces.

Ian grabbed the girls and set off down the ramp, running recklessly into the gloom and heedless of the danger of more obstacles or traps possibly lying in their path. The wide ramp sloped steadily down at an angle for hundreds of metres and the three fugitives were vaguely aware of alcoves and tunnels branching off at intervals to left and right, but they did not stop to investigate so determined were they to get away from the hissing horror in its gaping pit. They did not notice the decaying ruins of elaborate underground constructions lying in the shadows under layers of choking dust. Their only concern was to reach the faint glow of light now visible at the end of the ramp.

When at last they did reach the end they found themselves in a kind of vast natural amphitheatre under the hazy light of the three moons. They gaped around them in awed amazement. The ramp emerged into a flat-bottomed crater at least two kilometres wide which was almost exactly circular. The steeply sloped sides rose more than three hundred metres all the way round, and near the end of the ramp a wide paved road began its gradual spiral climb round and round the curving walls of the crater until it finally reached the ridge.

Set into the crater walls all along the spiral road were the shells of huge buildings with facades made of glass, plastic and metallic materials. But the most awe-inspiring feature was the colossal tower in the centre of the amphitheatre. Also built of metal and plastic and glass, its broad glittering mass rose level with the ridge and was connected to the wide highway by dozens of slender bridges radiating out like the spokes of a gigantic wheel.

The scale of the elegant and complex structure was breathtaking. The crater contained an entire city, a fantastic city of the most sophisticated design and engineering. But it was a dead city too. Totally deserted and dark. The structures were scarred and broken and decaying and the elegant bridges buckled and collapsing.

The floor of the crater was strewn with debris and abandoned machinery. It was a sad monument to a once glorious community.

‘I never guessed that anything like this was here...’ Vicki murmured, her eyes glistening as she gazed up at the miraculous constructions silhouetted against the sky.

Barbara’s lips parted in wonder and she clasped Ian’s hand. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she whispered.

Ian marvelled at the advanced techniques used in the design of the graceful bridges overhead. ‘All this couldn’t have been built by Koquillion’s mob!’ he said. ‘Monsters like that couldn’t have created this.’

Barbara shook her head in agreement. ‘Perhaps those silver creatures built it.’

‘Talk of the devil!’ Ian exclaimed, catching their arms.

‘Look up there.’

Almost directly above them, two silver figures were striding along one

of the rings of terracing connected by the spiral highway about halfway up the side of the crater.

'They seem to be carrying something,' said Vicki warily.

They watched in silence as the two gleaming creatures turned through an impressive-looking entrance on the terrace and disappeared into the mountain.

'Come on, let's follow them!' Ian suggested. 'If those things did build all this stuff they must be highly intelligent and civilised creatures. And anyway, there must be a way through from the tunnel by the wreck if they've come out up there. Perhaps we can find the TARDIS that way!'

'Assuming that those are the same silver things we saw before, of course,' Barbara pointed out. 'Still, it's definitely worth a try. And I'd rather try my luck with them than with that overgrown garden worm back there!'

Vicki held back, looking frightened. 'But we know nothing about the silver things,' she objected. 'Except that they killed all of us except for Bennett and me.'

'But you told us that Koquillion said that *his* people were responsible,' Ian reminded her impatiently. 'Surely you aren't suggesting that the silver things have anything to do with Koquillion?'

Vicki buried her face in her hands, overcome by confusion and grief at the loss of her father and of the other personnel from *Astra Nine*.

Ian put his arm round her shoulders. 'Come on, Vicki,'

he murmured gently. 'You'll be quite safe with us.' He led the way up the spiral road, keeping his arm round Vicki to prevent her from running away a second time. He knew that they had no hope of catching up with the mysterious aliens, nor of shadowing them at close quarters, but there was just a chance that their appearance up on the terrace would give a clue as to the route back to the cavern and the TARDIS.

After an exhausting climb up the sloping highway they reached the level on which the figures had disappeared into the ruined entrance. But it took them quite some time to retrace their steps along the terrace to the point above the end of the ramp where the huge doors – which had toppled out of their frames – lay balanced precariously

against one another like collapsed playing cards. The doors seemed much older than the rest of the structure as if an ancient temple or ceremonial entrance had been incorporated into the much more recent and highly developed architecture. Venturing gingerly inside, they found themselves in a large tunnel lined with massive slabs of smooth jade-coloured stone which emitted a pale emerald light all around them.

'I hope this stuff isn't as radioactive as it looks!' Ian exclaimed, instinctively keeping to the centre of the long polished rectangular corridor.

'It reminds me of those greenish numbers on the dials of luminous clocks,' Barbara said, taking Vicki's hand in an attempt to reassure their nervous companion.

All the way along the corridor were doors leading off, but all of them were sealed tight shut, with no visible means of opening the smooth metal panels flush with the walls. Eventually they came to a large drum-shaped lobby with several tunnels branching off. All but one of them were blocked by heavy metal shutters.

Ian turned to the others. 'Well, we don't have much choice I'm afraid,' he said, setting off across the circular plaza and into the single open tunnel.

This passageway was not so brightly illuminated as the long entrance corridor and it soon deteriorated into a crude dusty tunnel through the bare rock, with a treacherously uneven sand floor along which they stumbled more and more blindly. Here there did not seem to be any veins of fluorescent material to give a little light. The tunnel grew narrower and narrower and began twisting and turning madly. Then it would abruptly widen out into a small cavern before narrowing again into little more than a mere crevice.

Ian stopped. 'This doesn't seem to have been such a good idea after all,' he apologised in a disheartened voice. 'I think perhaps we should go back... and try again.'

Vicki clutched his sleeve in the darkness. 'There is some... some sort of light... There...!' she whispered.

Ian and Barbara looked all around them, straining to see.

'Where?' Ian whispered. 'Can you see anything, Barbara?'

‘No.’

‘ *There*!’ Vicki’s disembodied voice insisted. ‘By your feet.’

Ian and Barbara looked down. A faint yellow light was flashing on and off in a long thin line.

‘It must be a crack!’ Barbara exclaimed excitedly. ‘And that looks like the TARDIS’s beacon!’ She knelt down and put her eye to the narrow fissure. ‘It *is* the TARDIS, I can see it!’

With renewed enthusiasm, Ian and Barbara led the bewildered Vicki further along the crevice and the flashing light grew stronger at every step. At last they reached a tortuous section of tunnel where it simply disintegrated into a mound of rubble and they found themselves staggering down the heap of boulders brought down by the explosion caused by Koquillion’s sonic laser. A few seconds later they were standing on the cavern floor.

Speechless, Vicki stared incredulously at the scarred and dusty police box.

‘I wish the Doctor and I had known there was an easier way out!’ Ian muttered ruefully, nudging Barbara.

Barbara noticed a sort of large bundle dumped by the door of the police box and she ran forward with a cry of joyful recognition which immediately turned into a strangled whimper of concern. ‘Ian quickly! Help me!’ she gasped, kneeling by the bundle. ‘Oh Ian, I think he’s dead...’

14

‘... Am I... Are we in... Is this the TARDIS...?’ The Doctor’s voice seemed to be coming from a very long way off and he squinted up at the two hazy figures as if they were miles away.

‘He’s coming round at last!’ Barbara cried joyfully, kneeling down beside the chair and wetting the Doctor’s glistening brow with a handkerchief.

The Doctor blinked and shook his head from side to side to clear his vision. ‘Barbara? Is it really you, my dear?

Where are we?’ He tried to get up but collapsed back into the armchair, weak as a lamb.

‘We’re safely in the TARDIS,’ Ian said, bending over him with a cheerful smile. ‘I took the liberty of borrowing your key, Doctor.’

‘But how did you... where did I...’

‘We found you outside the TARDIS, Doctor,’ Barbara explained gently. ‘You’d had some kind of shock.’

The Doctor stared around at the familiar bright humming interior of the TARDIS. ‘Yes, yes, of course... I remember now... They must have brought me back...’

Sitting suddenly upright, the doctor gazed earnestly into his companions’ eyes, tugging at their arms in his excitement.

‘But where are they? Did you see them?’ he asked urgently.

‘ *They*? Who are *they*?’ Ian asked, totally mystified. The Doctor shook his head as if trying to concentrate.

‘Bennett... They got Bennett!’ he muttered, still rather befuddled. ‘They saved my life. Of course, Bennett was Koquillion, you realise that?’

Ian exchanged baffled glances with Barbara.

‘Bennett was Koquillion?’ Barbara echoed incredulously. Ian leaned closer to the Doctor, utterly bewildered ‘What do you mean, Doctor?’

The Doctor suddenly pushed Ian away and hauled himself unsteadily to his feet.

Barbara pulled Ian aside. ‘Later, Ian, later. He can’t talk now. We must let him rest.’

The Doctor took a few faltering steps around the control room, rubbing his temples and frowning to himself. ‘The girl... Vicki... where is she?’ he demanded urgently, almost fiercely, of them. ‘Did you bring her too?’

‘She’s outside, Doctor,’ Barbara said quietly, trying to soothe him.

The Doctor nodded approvingly. ‘Good, I’d like to talk to her. I think I’ll get some air...’ he said, taking Barbara’s handkerchief and mopping his face.

As he moved towards the door, Ian stepped forward to take his arm.

The Doctor snatched his own arm away. ‘It’s all right, Chesterton, I can manage. I’m not an invalid yet!’

he snapped tetchily.

Ian retreated next to Barbara and they watched the Doctor open the door and go outside.

‘Well, there’s gratitude for you,’ he muttered in an aggrieved tone. ‘We should have left the old sourpuss outside in the dust!’

Barbara touched his arm reproachfully. ‘What about Vicki?’ she said after a pause. ‘I wish we could take her with us.’

Ian turned to her in surprise.

‘Well, we can’t leave her *here*, can we?’ Barbara argued.

Ian grinned. ‘I know: let’s take Vicki and leave the Doctor behind!’ he chuckled.

*

Outside in the dark dusty cavern, the Doctor was talking quietly to Vicki, his arm around her shoulder in a protective, almost fatherly gesture. The pale, drawn girl listened with lowered eyes as the Doctor revealed the appalling truth as gently as he could. When he had finished, she stood there, numbed and silent for a long time. Then she looked up.

‘So Bennett murdered my father... and everybody...’ she said in a tiny voice. The Doctor nodded and gave her a gentle, comforting squeeze.

‘So I’ve got nobody. Nobody at all. I’m quite alone.’

Vicki whispered.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Not quite alone,’ he murmured.

Vicki smiled wanly. ‘Oh, there’s the rescue ship, of course,’ she said in a voice devoid of hope or comfort.

‘No, that wasn’t what I meant,’ said the Doctor, turning earnestly to her. He gazed into her large sad eyes for a while and then put his hands on her shoulders. ‘I meant, you’ve got us,’ he blurted out suddenly. ‘My dear Vicki, would you like to come with us?’

Vicki turned her head to look at the shabby, dusty old police box standing in the gloom, 'In that... that old hut there?' she exclaimed.

Swallowing his pride, the Doctor put his head to one side and grinned mischievously. 'Appearances can be deceptive, my dear,' he warned. 'We can travel anywhere and anytime in that old hut thing, as you call it. We are not bounded by Space or by Time.'

Vicki's lips parted in wonder. 'Then... then it's true? It really is a time-machine?'

The Doctor nodded secretively. 'Oh, it's a great deal more than that, I assure you! If you seek adventure, I can promise you an abundance of it.' He leaned closer to her, and spoke confidentially. 'And you'd be among good friends who will take care of you,' he promised.

Vicki looked from the old man to the TARDIS and back again. Her eyes shone with temptation, but there was also a cloud of doubt in them.

The Doctor patted her arm.. 'I'll leave you alone here to think about it for a bit,' he said, wandering towards the door of the TARDIS. 'I shan't be long.' And with a little hopeful wave, he disappeared inside.

Barbara and Ian were very relieved to see that the Doctor looked much calmer when he wandered back into the TARDIS control room. They hurried forward to meet him.

'Doctor, we've been talking about Vicki...' Barbara began enthusiastically.

The Doctor held up his hands; his severe face suddenly turned to smiles. 'And I'm glad to see that you've reached exactly the same decision as I have myself!' he said cheerfully. 'So let's find out what she has decided, shall we?'

The Doctor turned round to the open door and called Vicki inside.

There was a few seconds' pause, and then Vicki walked tentatively across the TARDIS threshold. She stopped dead and stared around in astonishment. 'But it's... it's so huge in here!' she gasped. 'And the outside is just... just...'

'Just an old hut thing I think you called it!' the Doctor interrupted with mock severity.

Smiling broadly, Barbara and Ian moved forward to greet her. ‘Vicki, are you going to come with us?’ Barbara asked hopefully.

The Doctor walked over to the central control console and pretended to be engrossed in checking over the controls. In reality he was waiting with bated breath for Vicki’s decision.

Vicki gaped at her bright, spacious surroundings. It was cool and calm inside the weird machine. She hesitated for a while, still trying to conquer her amazement. Then she glanced at the Doctor. He was peeking round the control mechanism of the console, anxiously trying to predict her reaction.

Then she glanced at Barbara and Ian: their expressions told her that they, too, had once experienced the same sense of wonder and awe that she herself was now experiencing. Their nods and smiles reassured her and convinced her that she truly was among friends.

‘If you’ll have me...’ she said huskily. She cleared her throat and smiled. ‘Yes, yes, I’d like to. Thank you...’

A tear welled up in the corner of Vicki’s eye and hung perilously poised on her lashes, so that she dared not blink for fear that it would roll down her face and give her away.

‘I don’t really think the *Seeker* will find the wreck anyway,’

she confessed. ‘There’s too little power left to maintain the signal.’

The Doctor fussed over the console, secretly sighing with satisfaction. Ian grinned and nodded his approval.

Barbara reached out and touched Vicki’s hand.

‘Off we go then,’ the Doctor said brightly, operating the door lock mechanism and setting the controls to prepare for dematerialisation.

Vicki looked up sharply as if startled at the suddenness of everything. She moved her mouth to say something about the rescue ship, but it was too late. The Doctor had initiated the dematerialisation sequence.

The central control column started its solemn rhythmic rise and fall and the TARDIS wobbled and shook, groaning and rumbling with its customary noise of protest and indignation.

Like some strange ghost the image of the TARDIS

slowly vanished from the darkened cave. For a few moments the noise of its engines continued to echo eerily around the enclosed space, and then that too was gone.

Within minutes it was as though the TARDIS had never been there.

15

From the radio panel in the main compartment of the *Astra Nine*, Trainee Oliphant's disembodied voice was repeating a terse call: 'Seeker *Mission Craft to* Astra Nine, *do you copy?*

Seeker *Mission Craft to* Astra Nine, *please respond... Rescue Craft to* Astra Nine...'

On the radio scanner the tuner arc was sweeping round and round its glowing centre and the echo signal of the TARDIS pulsed with a shrill bleep on each circuit.

Suddenly there was a muffled movement outside. Then the two silver figures loomed in the open hatchway and bent their tall heads so they could squeeze themselves into the wreck.

They stood silently watching the radar pulse and listening to the radio transmission. They watched the echo pulse of the TARDIS slowly fade and then disappear altogether. They turned slightly to one another as if exchanging a telepathic dialogue.

The taller figure moved forward, reached towards the radio panel and passed its hand in front of it. There was a dull bang, a small puff of black smoke and Oliphant's voice died away into a rush of static.

Then the taller figure turned to the panel containing the transmitter for the locator beam which Vicki had switched on before leaving the wreck with Ian and Barbara.

It passed its hand again across the machine and there was another dull bang and another brief curl of black smoke. Again the two silver figures turned their heads briefly towards each other.

Then they turned round and strode out.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Trainee Oliphant walked into the dimly illuminated navigation capsule with its myriad flashing displays and slumped into his seat. He touched a few keys on the communications panel and ran the playback on the response disc. It

contained a number of routine messages from Earth and other colonial planetary settlements. But from *Astra Nine* there was nothing.

Frowning with irritation he checked the automatic transmitter disc. It appeared to be operating satisfactorily, sending out his recorded call every few seconds. Swinging his chair around, he checked the locator beacon receiver.

Nothing. There was not even a homing signal being transmitted from those damn castaways.

With a shrug, Oliphant activated the hologram table. He was depressed to see how little of the cubic word puzzle he had completed. He stared at the clues and selected one which already had a few letters in place.

'Forceful cosmic umbrella arrangement? Four and four,'

he murmured.

The relevant positions were buried deep in the shimmering cube. ' – T – R – A – –,' he spelled out like a child learning to read.

He shrugged again and lost interest. He yawned and made an effort to check out the alternative radio frequencies that the *Astra Nine* castaways might use if their power reserves were really very low. But the different channels yielded nothing. All that could be heard was the endless static of deep space.

Suddenly the shutter swept open to admit Weinberger and Commander Smith. Before Oliphant had time to switch off the hologram table the American had leaned over his shoulder, chewing his inevitable wadge of gum.

'Star Wars,' Weinberger said, stabbing the trainee in the back. 'Simple.'

Oliphant stared at the puzzle. It fitted. Or at least the letters fitted. 'Could be,' he said non-commitally as Weinberger moved over and dropped into his seat. Smith reached down and switched off the hologram table. 'Your watch report please, Mr Oliphant,' he ordered coldly.

Oliphant gave his companions the brief and gloomy details.

Weinberger reached over and checked the locator beacon receiver.

‘Hell, those goddam castaways couldn’t even stir their asses to send Santa a letter,’ he said.

Commander Smith calmly inquired about the rendezvous arrangements and Oliphant informed him that the *Astra Nine* beacon should have been transmitting by now.

‘Perhaps the power cells have failed, sir,’ Oliphant suggested. ‘Their last transmission was very weak and they reported an increasing loss of power.’

‘We shall establish bipolar orbit as arranged. The planetary day is only thirteen hours, so we shall be able to scan the entire surface reasonably rapidly from a thousand kilometres out.’ Smith stared at the maze of sophisticated instruments for a while in silence, his thin greyish hair glinting in the soft light. ‘Let us hope we can soon send appropriate seasonal greetings back to Earth on behalf of those poor devils down there,’ he murmured.

Weinberger grunted. ‘I’m not sure I can face another microwaved frozen turkey so soon after Thanksgiving,’ he growled, continuing his checks. ‘Anyhow, we’ve still to rendezvous and establish orbit. So far there’s no guarantee this heap of Reaganium is gonna get us there.’

As Commander Smith turned to Oliphant to ask how successful the course correction had been, the young trainee suddenly pointed at one of his displays. ‘There it is again!’ he exclaimed. ‘Monopole field in the immediate field, increasing exponentially...’

Weinberger clicked abruptly into his automatic routine.

‘Check run,’ he ordered.

‘Checked and confirmed A operational,’ Oliphant rapped out, touching keys and glaring at screens. ‘Field closing in.’

‘Maximise inertia shield.’

‘Maximised but not holding, sir.’

Weinberger glanced at the Commander standing beside his seat. ‘This is a carbon copy, Commander. Same routine as last time.’

Next moment the instruments and screens went haywire with a dazzling strobing display of random graphics and digital sequences. Alarm bells started sounding.

Smith's face went white under the brilliant reflections of multicoloured lights. 'The inertia shield has just been totally revitalised,' he gasped. 'But that would require an enormous monopole field...

Then everything went blue.

They all stared dumbfounded as a filigree tracing of sapphire sparkles stretched across the capsule behind them like an electric net.

Suddenly Oliphant jumped out of his seat, as he received a shock like the lash of a steel whip.

Weinberger got out of his seat, his skin feeling dry and brittle. He pointed at something behind the set of sparks.

The sparks vanished abruptly to be replaced by a dazzling blue image.

'There it is!' screamed Oliphant, staring goggle-eyed at the shimmering shape.

Then with a series of violent turbulent spasms the thing vanished as though it had never been there. The bluish glow faded.

Smith, Weinberger and Oliphant stood in the pale green light of the navigation controls, staring at one another incredulously.

Then Weinberger pulled himself together. 'Cancel alarms. Check all circuits,' he said automatically, sitting back in his seat. 'Resume operations as soon as instruments are clear.'

Oliphant stood still, rooted to the spot. 'It was like a ghost... like some kind of mirage...' he croaked, staring at the empty space before him.

Smith tallied his thoughts and turned to cast an eye over the systems as Weinberger quickly checked them out. It was as if they were pretending that everything was proceeding perfectly straightforwardly. 'I don't know,'

Smith replied hoarsely. 'Why would it appear in here?'

Oliphant turned and sat at his console and resumed his check procedures as if in a dream.

'There was some similar interference reported by *Astra Nine,* ' Commander Smith reminded them. 'Perhaps the survivors will be able to shed some light on our own experiences in this neighbourhood.' He

put his hand on Oliphant's shoulder. 'Mr Oliphant, kindly log the galactic co-ordinates for those two emissions for future reference.

We will need to be able to chart our positions very accurately and compare them with *Astra Nine*'s experiences.'

Smith left the module and the shutter whispered shut behind him.

Oliphant tried to concentrate on the tasks allotted him but he could not banish the inexplicable events of the past few minutes from his mind.

'Chinese!' he suddenly blurted out, screwing up his eyes as he tried to recapture the alien image that had hovered among them for a few seconds.

Weinberger was too preoccupied to hear.

Oliphant turned to him. 'The Chinese have been experimenting with image projection,' he said excitedly.

Weinberger glanced up. 'Image projection? At this distance?' he laughed. 'Don't press my button!'

Oliphant winced at the American catchphrase. 'I am not,' he retorted indignantly. 'You forget the Chinese have a mission investigating Geldof Eight. That's less than a light year away.'

Weinberger leaned forward, suddenly interested. 'Yeah, I guess that thing did look a little oriental...' he recalled.

'Maybe you're not such a fool after all.'

'It resembles a late twenty-first century Chinese revival style storage unit,' Oliphant explained.

Weinberger watched him narrowly. 'Did it really?' he said, chewing violently on his gum. 'Looked more like a ticket booth from one of those old Mississippi steam wheeler company offices to me. I recall seeing one in the Kyno Museum in St Louis.'

'Why would the Chinese project an image like that?'

Oliphant demanded scornfully.

Weinberger chewed, lost for a reply. Then he grinned malevolently. 'Perhaps they're trying to get at us,' he said.

‘Drive us crazy.’

Oliphant stared at the display which was showing them the course which would take them into orbit around Dido.

‘Or perhaps they don’t want us snooping around here,’ he murmured. ‘But that still doesn’t explain the monopole fields...’

Weinberger’s face was suffused with an eerie greenish glow from the navigation displays.

‘Just let ’em try and stop us,’ he growled. ‘Thirty hours to orbit.’

‘Just a bit of monopole turbulence in the space-time continuum, my dear,’ the Doctor said, patting Vicki’s arm reassuringly. ‘Nothing to worry about. We’ve stabilised again quite safely.’

Barbara and Ian exchanged rueful glances as the TARDIS stopped gyrating and they were able to stand up again without clinging to the edge of the control console.

Their departure from Dido had been more than usually bumpy and erratic and they had spent a harrowing few minutes watching the Doctor as he struggled with the controls to prevent his machine from materialising prematurely into some space-time no man’s land.

‘Very odd, very odd,’ the Doctor muttered to himself, fussing around the console. ‘Almost got caught up in a powerful artificial magnetic field... Probably the field generated by the plasma drive from a spacecraft’s propulsion unit... Confounded galactic traffic should look where it’s going...’

‘What was that about galactic traffic looking where it’s going, Doctor?’ asked Barbara, pricking up her ears and moving round next to him.

The Doctor looked startled as if he had not wanted to be overheard. ‘Oh, nothing, my dear young lady... nothing at all,’ he replied evasively.

Now that things seemed to have settled down again Ian was anxious to get some information out of the Doctor about events after he and Bennett had disappeared from the wreck. ‘So there were survivors among the inhabitants after all,’ he murmured, now seeing the mysterious silver figures in a completely new light. ‘Bennett hadn’t destroyed them all.’

‘Quite,’ the Doctor grunted, still preoccupied with the hoarsely humming control column. ‘Now they have their planet to themselves again and somehow I don’t think they’ll permit the rescue craft to land... They’ll want to be left alone in peace to rebuild their civilisation.’

‘So that was why you were so keen to bring Vicki with us!’

The Doctor smiled mysteriously. ‘Not really, Chesterton,’ he said quietly, glancing sideways at their nervous young guest. ‘I had all sorts of reasons.’

He wandered amiably around the console, making a few brief adjustments and then clapped his hands and rubbed them briskly together. ‘We’ll be materialising in a little while,’ he announced, strolling over and sitting in the armchair. ‘Perhaps this time we’ll be able to relax and have a nice little rest!’ Closing his eyes he lay back luxuriously in the chair and within a few minutes he had dozed off.

The others stared at him. ‘I do wish he wouldn’t do that!’ Ian muttered nervously. ‘It’s getting to be a habit!’

‘Are we still travelling?’ Vicki asked hesitantly. ‘We don’t seem to be moving at all now.’

Barbara gave an ironic little laugh. ‘Oh yes, we’re travelling all right, Vicki. We’re travelling further and faster than you’ve ever travelled in your life!’

Vicki stared round at the humming control room, still keeping one hand on the edge of the console— just in case.

She looked rather disappointed, as if time-travel was turning out to be much less exciting than she had imagined. ‘Well, it just seems a bit... a bit dull...’ she said with an apologetic giggle.

Ian and Barbara exchanged amused looks. They shook their heads and grinned wryly.

‘Just you wait,’ Ian warned her. ‘Travelling with the Doctor may get very confusing, but believe me, it’s never ever dull!’

Next moment there was a faint jarring motion and a sort of rumbling noise from under the floor. Vicki’s eyes popped wide open with apprehension and she gave the others a queasy smile. Barbara feigned indifference. ‘Oh, what an odd sensation...’ she said nervously.

Next moment there was a sickening lurch and they almost lost their balance as the TARDIS gyrated wildly while emitting a harsh warbling shriek.

'There we are at last!' exclaimed the Doctor suddenly wide awake. He sprang out of his chair, bright-eyed and smiling as if he had just enjoyed a good night's sleep. He hurried over to the console and watched the central column slowly sink to rest. He gave a contented yawn.

'And all in one piece!'

'But Doctor, what's that swaying movement?' Ian demanded anxiously. 'Surely you can feel it?'

All at once the whole floor tilted up at an alarming angle. The Doctor's chair slid across against the wall and the hat-stand fell over with a crash.

The Doctor held on to the edge of the console and frowned at his instruments. 'Oh, a little terrestrial instability, Chesterton,' he muttered.

Barbara and Vicki clung to each other with one hand while their other hand grasped the edge of the console.

'Doctor, what's happening?' Barbara screamed.

As the TARDIS tilted abruptly back the other way, Ian grabbed the edge of the console to save himself from sliding down the slope. 'Doctor, do something... Take off again!' he yelled.

The Doctor frowned tetchily. 'I think you mean *dematerialise* again,' he snapped, prodding a couple of buttons tentatively, as though he was unsure what the result would be.

Suddenly the TARDIS keeled right over. The helpless occupants were hurled head over heels so that they found themselves hanging upside down from the edge of the console unit with their feet pointing towards the ceiling.

'I don't understand it at all,' the Doctor cried. 'We appear to be in free angular motion under the influence of a strong gravitational field...'

'We're falling!' Vicki screamed. 'We're *falling!* '

‘Yes indeed, that’s what I said,’ the Doctor cried, his reddening face buried between his upstretched arms. ‘So hold on tight... Anything could happen now... And I’m afraid it probably will!’

Epilogue

SEEKER MISSION: PRELIMINARY REPORT

DIDO RENDEZVOUS

Established Dido orbit Terrestrial Year 01/12/20/23.25

following delay and misrouting after two encounters with unidentified continuum turbulence at 01/12/17/22.10 and at 01/12/19/01.40.

No beacon transmission received from Astra Nine . *Wreckage eventually located in Polar 3 Quadrant at Equatorial 91.*

Landed two medix, two tex, two surveyors and six support group personnel.

Faint residual power traces found in wreck energy cells.

Radiation breach in propulsion priming reactor. Severe damage to tachyon polarisers. Electrophase condensers missing: apparently removed by crew, reason unknown.

Evidence of gross interference with navigation program.

Possibly a result of Astra Nine *encounter with continuum turbulence. More likely due to crew intervention, reason unknown.*

No trace whatsoever of Astra Nine *personnel or survivors.*

Corpse of large saurian creature found in vicinity of wreck.

Global infrared survey revealed scattered subterranean-dwelling fauna over Upper Hemisphere.

Several highly developed settlements located in vicinity of wreck and elsewhere. All abandoned and in advanced stages of decay.

Two sentient anthropoid beings located in vicinity of wreck.

Believed to be male and female. Both killed during encounter with support group personnel before any contact established. No evidence of any other intelligent life.

Return visit believed unproductive.

Quit Dido orbit Terrestrial Year 01/12/25/00.55.

Happy Christmas.

Peace on Earth.

Goodwill to all persons.

Document Outline

- Front cover
- Rear cover
- Editor's Note
- Title page
- Copyright
- Contents
- Prologue
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen
- Chapter Fourteen
- Chapter Fifteen
- Epilogue

Table of Contents

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Epilogue